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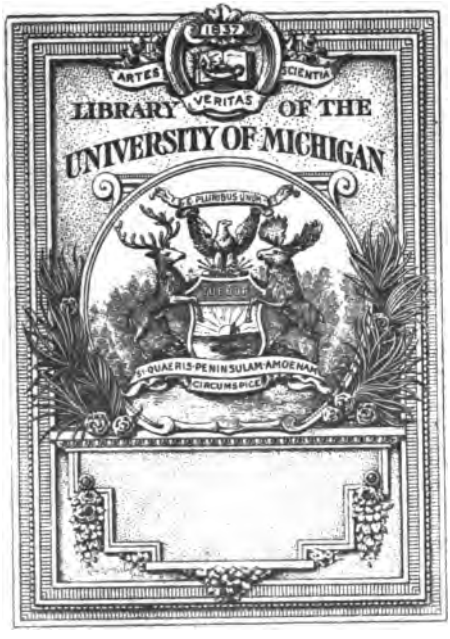
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MY POOR RELATIONS

STORIES OF DUTCH PEASANT LIFE

BY

MAARTEN MAARTENS

AUTHOR OF "GOD'S FOOL," "SOME WOMEN I HAVE KNOWN," ETC. ETC.

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IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. I

LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1904.

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JAN HUNKUM'S MONEY.

MY POOR RELATIONS.

JAN HUNKUM'S MONEY.

I.

THE whole hamlet effervesced with delicious perturbation. Everyone was telling everyone else that Jan Hunkum lay murdered in his bed.

The Hemel is one of the dirtiest spots in a country where no spot is very dirty. The appearance of the place is against it: some few dozen disorderly hovels lie pitched across a field, their builders having allowed them to fall as they chose. Some, abusing this permission, lurch heavily, looking as if, like many of the people inside them, they had frequently taken a drop too much. Others bend backwards, propped up with the pride that cometh before a fall, and the general crookedness, and the old

age that accentuates it, give the tumble-down dwellings a disreputable leer such as many of the indwellers have developed for themselves. Our conceptions of heaven—which is "De Hemel"—must inevitably remain inadequate at the best: perhaps the angels up yonder, in cloudland, cannot properly distinguish the gulf which, in our appreciation, sinks a pool of poverty and wickedness like this little Dutch hamlet beneath a favoured nook of our deteriorated Paradise such as, say, Monte Carlo. Still, the name is undoubtedly euphemistic: and yet, again, how easily the place might have been, or grown, worse! True, its houses, and heads, are untidily thatched; the nakedness of the land is as patent as that of many a yokel pretending to till it: never has anything connected with the village been properly drained or trained: never has anything been quite sufficiently scrubbed, excepting the newest born baby —yet, as a rule, the community washes itself grey, and in all its rag-and-bone debasement it tries to draw the line at vermin. Dutch squalor does.

In Jan Hunkum's day the old man's cottage was the only hale and hearty building of the lot. Forty years of his stupid life Jan Humkum spent in it—more than half the whole—and during that long period of possession, for he owned it, he had it once

repainted and twice repaired. Therefore it *stood,* distinctly noticeable, amongst the straggling paths and rough potato-plots, with a yellow zone of weeded gravel round it, a sort of self-important centre towards which its ramshackle surrounders seemed to have been huddling before they came to pieces on the moor.

Across the open space in front of this central cottage a rabble of excited men, women, and children now swarmed, eagerly expectant of horrors to come. It was early morning, misty and chilly, a raw November daybreak. The damp little dwelling stared back at the whispering groups, its two windows tightly shuttered, the door in the middle ostentatiously opaque.

Somebody — no one knew, who — running past somebody else, had cried out that Jan Hunkum lay murdered. Somebody — opinion here varied — had raced off to Horstwyk, the village, for its single policeman. Suddenly everyone was full of the news. No two stories coincided as to persons or particulars. Nobody really knew anything. That, too, was delightful. For necessity became the swift mother of invention.

But all were fully agreed that it served Jan Hunkum right. Not because he was a bad man—few of them cared to discriminate badness—but because he was rich and a miser, and they, the whole

tribe of them, were his putative heirs. 'Tis ill waiting for the death of a cousin close on eighty, when that cousin daily duns you for exorbitant rent.

Jan Hunkum had long been known as the oldest inhabitant. There might easily have been many far older—for the human plant, as all men can see, excepting sanitarians and scientists, grows toughest on a dunghill—but the population tired of its grandparents as soon as the old people got "it" on the chest, and would bundle them off to the Horstwyk poorhouse with a shamelessness which disgusted the very beggars of the more respectable place. In defence of the Hemelers it must be stated that admission into the poorhouse was considered a safeguard against death, on the principle that it takes two killings to kill a pauper, just as a charity child is known to have nine lives. "And what's more," said Joop Sloop, the Hemelers' self-appointed wiseacre, "there never yet was anybody born so fond of his relatives, that he could 'a stood them coughing all night unless he'd had a cough of his own!" After seventy all died of "it" on the chest. Nobody had ever been murdered. That was distinctly original.

It was just like Jan Hunkum, who had always been unique. Who but he had ever kept money in his purse or kept a purse to keep the money in?

Jan Hunkum had strong-boxes, iron safes, coffers full of gold. Nobody had ever beheld them: everybody knew they were there. Nobody minded their existence—have there not always been rich folk and poor folk?—but everybody abused him for the cruel old miser he certainly was, these improvident rapscallions all around him being far too necessitous to understand the madness of money unspent.

And yet he was one of themselves, cousin, variously removed, to the whole lazy crew of them. Herein also his case was peculiar. For while many of them were affiliated, and many at feud, he was everybody's relation and detested by all.

A voice rose above the loud murmurs by the cottage. "I won't go for to say it serves him right!" said the voice. "Seeing as 'tis Goramighty gives us all our dues. But I will say as 'twas bound to happen. Lor, it'll happen again!"

This statement was received in silence.

"With an old man living by himself," continued the voice, "in a house that's packed with gold from floor to ceiling!"

Though all recognised this well-known fact, yet a thrill ran through the assembly to see it thus nakedly exposed.

"And tramps going by all day," said another

voice. This suggestion received general approval. Everybody eagerly said—"Tramps."

"Is the gold *there?*" queried a small boy with a wizened face. He pointed to the cottage.

A murmur arose like the swift soughing of the wind. Momentous question! Was the gold still there? Each hungry creature gazed into his neighbour's apprehensive eyes. Supposing that, in the very moment of righteous acquisition, the treasure of the Hemel had melted away from the extended claw! A groan broke loose: then, of a sudden, all were talking together, out loud.

They must get into the silent house to make sure! They could go round by the back—no, that would be impossible!—they must all break open the door. Somebody—no, all together—by the little scullery window!—why together?—for a moment, in the fierce flare of universally disclaimed distrust, there arose a menace of battle—all together, mind! Share and share alike—who says the police must enter first? Oh, only that fool, Jaap Avis!

"'Tis the law," said Jaap Avis quietly, audible amid the noise.

"The law? And a man's relations? Shall a dead corpse lie weltering in gore and its own relations not try to restore it?"

A woman's screech had soared above the Babel with "own relations!" Immediately there followed a lull. A gaunt creature with violent eyes had pushed herself to the front. "Yes, own relations," she repeated fiercely. "'Tis a dead man's nearest relations must look after things. *That's* the law! And I'm sure, if my Uncle Hunkum——"

Fierce as she was, she shrank back before their outburst of abuse. "Uncle, indeed! Her uncle! The impudence! Her daughter's uncle, perhaps? Ha! Ha! He was everyone's uncle and nobody's uncle! They were all his equal relations, his cousins, his heirs!"

"No!" cried Joop Sloop, the publican and barber. There was conscious authority in his accents. "Shares'll depend on degrees of relationship. Of cousinship," he added, with a scornful glance at the silently defiant "niece."

For a moment again they stood hushed, all grown suddenly genealogical. And amidst the knitted brows and dumbly computing lips a meek little voice piped forth—

"But supposing he's left a Scripture, Joop?"

"A testament, you mean, Jaap Avis. How ignorant you people are! He hasn't left, as I happen to be aware, any sort of last will or testament."

"How aware?" cried a dozen voices. "What's a last will or testament, Joop?"

The barber rubbed his unshaven cheek.

"Never you mind how I know what I know," he said.

"I don't care," persisted Jaap Avis, the shoemaker, sullenly. "When a man makes a writing at a notary's, his relatives don't get a cent. I know they don't. For why? I had a plaguy sister did it."

They all jeered at this boast. "A sister as was a lady, I suppose?" said one.

"No a lady's maid," retorted the little man, too weak to swear at any but the absent or the dead. He turned on his heel.

"And what's more," continued Joop Sloop, with unction, "I advise you all to wait very patiently till Government pays each man his share. Government's never in a hurry. 'Cause why? 'Cause Government never dies. And now go home, you people, and don't anybody talk of breaking in doors."

"But the money!" clamoured half a dozen voices. "The money! Is it there? Is it gone?"

"*He's* there, at any rate," said a young girl, who, till then, had stood silent beside the "niece." All stared at her. A new idea again.

"*He's* there," the girl repeated hurriedly. "One'd think his ghost was peering at us through that hole

in the left-hand shutter. I've seen his eye a-twinkling there a hundred times when I came to bring the bread. *That's* his bedroom."

A couple of women shrieked. The girl stepped forward to the barred and watchful house. "La, I saw something shine!" she cried, and leaped away.

But, if this was a *ruse* to protect the cottage, it failed. Protestant Dutchmen are the least superstitious of mankind. With a general outcry, "The thief! The thief!" the whole band, intent upon saving "their" property, rushed madly at the door.

Before anyone could reach it, they saw it fall open. The murdered man stood on the threshold. Screaming now, in good earnest, the whole dingy flight fluttered back.

He was wrapped in a faded dressing-gown. His livid face, with the bushy eyebrows and immense protruding underlip, was swathed in linen bandages. There were horrid stains upon the bandages. His wicked eyes shot fire.

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" he said: there was no laugh in the sound. "Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!" For a moment he seemed incapable of any other utterance. "My poor relations!" he said at length. "My poor, poor—relations! Are you all there, my relations? Has nobody forgotten to come?"

They stood in a furious half-circle. But nobody minded his sarcasm, except the girl, who shrank behind her mother.

"Walk in, ladies and gentlemen," continued Jan, standing aside with a swift profusion of bows. The ends of linen on his bald head went bobbing to and fro. "Walk in, pray, and inspect the property! A very desirable property!" Then, as nobody moved, he burst out—

"Come here—do you mind me?—you white-livered cowards! What are you afraid of, you skulking thieves? Is it a dead man you fear, you robbers? Afraid he's not dead enough—ha!" And now he really laughed—a discordant twang. "Come in and see what there's left of Jan Hunkum's money! Each of you may keep what he finds and be welcome to waste it!—ha!" By sheer force of passion he dragged them towards him: slowly the whole troop crept forward into the narrow passage and, pushed from behind, all over the two little rooms.

The cottage presented a scene of the wildest disorder. Everything bore evidence, in the bedroom, of a struggle, in the parlour, of a search. The scant furniture had been upset and flung asunder and scattered across the floor. Nothing seemed seriously damaged or broken, but the cupboard doors swung

everywhere unlocked, the drawers, with their meagre contents, lay yawning right and left. The clumsy visitors hung open-mouthed. Not one of them had ever been, as yet, inside Jan Hunkum's jealously bolted door.

"Now search while you can!" cried the miser, rubbing his discoloured hands. "If there's a penny left, find it, keep it, and spend it! But only for money, mind! Is there any money left, you murderers? Which of you has got it, you cut-throats? Or have you already divided it between you—share and share alike!—and nobody blabs?"

The gaunt woman turned indignantly. "Now the Lord Almighty is witness, Jan Hunkum," she said, "that none of us has ever seen a penny of yours. *I* haven't. And well I might."

"Is that you?" replied the old man coolly. "Trust you to talk loudest, Mary Brock. And why, pray, should *I* pay, more than others, for Mary's daily gin?"

"'Cause she's your niece, don't you know—cousin!" broke in a lean woman with a hump.

"My niece? That's a lie, and she knows it. Her grandfather was brother to my mother. Oh, I know about your precious relationships—none better—as some day you'll all find out!"

At this moment Jaap Avis, whose mild eyes had been ceaselessly travelling round the apartment, darted forward and picked something up. "One florin for me," he said gently. "You said we might keep all we found."

"What!" shrieked the old man. "Have they left me a florin? G——, let me look at it, Jaap Avis! A florin! A whole silver florin! Well, an honest man's word is as good as an oath, they say"—his voice died to a moan—"you must keep it." He sank into an old wicker armchair and covered his face with his hands.

The search now began in earnest; the whole rabble turned and twisted in the narrow space, bumping one against the other as they painfully bent, while the children gleefully scrambled in and out, or rubbed their grumbling elders' unaccustomed backs. The owner of the cottage had adjusted his bandage and sat watching, with folded arms, no expression on his wicked old face.

"That's right!" he said. "Mind you look everywhere! Think of Jaap Avis' florin! Only yesterday, as all of you know, my house was heaped full of gold and silver. And now there's nothing left but one beggarly florin, and Jaap Avis has gotten that. Oh Law!" He began to moan and beat his breast.

"Jaap Avis!" he cried with sudden fury. "Jaap Avis has gotten that!"

Evidently, no such luck was in store for the others. One by one, the searchers slackened; the children had long ago desisted: suddenly all stopped, dead beat. The oldest and weariest, lingering last, sank in a heap on the floor. None of the Hemelers was accustomed to labour in any form.

"Not a penny left," said the old man slowly, and stared at the knocked-up do-nothings in front of him. "Robbed of everything in a single night. Are you sure that you've looked everywhere? Jaap Avis found a florin. My last florin. Look again. Look everywhere. Look again."

Some of them turned despairing eyes to various corners, but the heart had gone out of the Hemelers. Jan Hunkum's glance fell upon the girl, as she lolled, indifferent, against the outer door. "Go home, Liza Brock," he said almost gently for him. And she obeyed him, slinking away.

"And now, hear me, you all!" he began. "You see that I've been robbed of every penny. Go and find the man that did it: go and bring my money back. It's in a brown leather chest—no very big chest—a brown leather chest with bright brass fittings. All my money's in that chest. The man that

brings my money back—hearken to me: I swear it by the Heaven that made us—made *me,* at any rate, you brutes—the man that brings me my money back shall have every penny of it, legally, lawfully, by will and testament, if ever I come to die. But first he must kill the man that took it. And hearken again, you brutes"—he spoke very carefully, without any excuse for the violence of his language—"you've seen the whole place now, as you've thirsted to do for years and years—oh, I know you!—you've seen the coffers and cupboards, and the diamands all piled to the ceiling"—he cast a swift leer round the bare but clean little bedroom—"and now if one of you ever darkens my threshold again on any pretence—mind you, on *any* pretence—I swear it: he shall never—no, not if he did it to save my life—he shall never inherit a penny of mine. I shall write that down in a will to-night, lest I die ere I've done it. Get out!" He pointed to the door and continued silently pointing till the last ragged figure had slouched away into the bluish autumn mist.

Then he slowly raised himself and began to unwind the blood-stained bandages. His bald head with its fluffy fringe, his skinny neck and sharp cheek-bones and chin, the whole cunning, covetous countenance gradually stood out clear against the

whitewashed wall. He drew forward to the little tenpenny shaving-glass that hung in the window. There was no sign of a wound anywhere. He chuckled softly. "I should like to hear Jaap Avis," he muttered aloud, "when he finds that his florin's a bad one. I've had it about me more than twenty years: never did I think to get so advantageously rid of it. The more fool I to take counterfeit coin!"

II.

THAT evening the customary Saturday conversazione at Joop Sloop's was quite unprecedently animated. Clouds of surmise and suggestion ascended over the pipes and "Hollands." There was much discussion, but little argument.

Immemorial tradition decrees that the least indolent of the Hemelers shall shave all the others on Saturday nights at a farthing per chin. Also that he shall be permitted to eke out his little profits by keeping them waiting as long as he likes (they're not in a hurry) whilst purveying, for their delectation, the smallest of gossip and the filthiest of unlicensed spirits. Joop Sloop had now been a barber for a quarter of a century, by right of his possessing the

biggest front room. Also he possessed a strapping red and black daughter, Julia, who could take the gin-money, and a coarse jest, with a laugh, and could parry the jest. He was absent to-night. Meanwhile Julia was doing the honours.

"Well?" said Jaap Avis with measured exultation. "Now whom do you believe, pray, neighbours, Joop Sloop or me? Can a man leave his money where he likes or can't he?" Jaap Avis felt that sometimes 'tis pleasanter to be proved mistaken. "Jan Hunkum makes his testament and none of us gets our own. Now that he's lost his money, the old rogue gives it away."

"*You* needn't complain, Jaap Avis," replied one of the men with a grunt. "You've got your florin, you have. None of us can say as much." The others looked stolid approval: very rarely does the real peasant commit himself to the proverbial "nod" of assent.

Jaap Avis smiled. "Yes, I've got my florin," he said. But then his complacent cheeks sank in. "And what's a beggarly florin?" he said.

"'Tis twenty stivers, a hundred cents. Two whole years' shaving," came the quick reply. "'Tis a bird in the hand, and is a bit of good luck, 'tis a—shame! You'll have to stand treat, Jaap Avis,"

The speaker, a blustering bully, struck the table with his fist.

"All right: hold your row," muttered the shoemaker fretfully. "Julia, get Fistycuffs a pennyworth o' gin!" The girl stretched across her brown arm for the bottle, throwing little Jaap Avis, as she did so, a look of unconscious contempt. "And fill it up full!" grinned the giant. "Don't try to bully *me*," retorted Julia, deliberately spilling a great splash from the glass.

At this juncture her father entered. In the sudden silence every face said—"Well?" All being anxious to put the same question, nobody spoke. Solemnly the slow barber seated himself.

"A—a—ah," he said. Then he wiped his forehead with a red pocket-handkerchief. "Mum's the word," he said.

"Did anybody ask ye anything?" questioned the bully. Joop Sloop stared straight in front of him. "The testament," he continued softly, "is sealed. Mum's the word."

Somebody more nervous than the rest spat on the floor.

"And the fate of the Hemel," whispered Joop Sloop, "is sealed too."

A flash of covetousness died away across twenty

cautiously closing eyes. The barber leant back in his chair, secure of his effect. "But hush!" he said, and put one finger to his lips. "So much I owe to Cousin Jan!"

The bully stumbled to his feet and came heavily forward. "You'll finish now that you've begun, Joop Sloop!" he cried, "or I'll mash your potato nose into a pancake, Joop Sloop!" He thrust up a great dumpy fist: the girl struck it down. "Two goes of gin," she said deliberately, "to whoever turns the drunken rascal out!"

"I'll turn myself out, if you'll gi' me the drink," replied the fellow coolly. "Boys, you all heard her! She owes me twopennyworth of the best Schiedam!" He grinned. "Best or worst, 'tis all equally bad," he said—"Pah!" This termination seemed to exasperate Julia. She ran round the counter. "Pack o' cowards!" she screamed. "Smoke your pipes and see me lick the biggest coward amongst ye!" A lubberly, yellow-haired young fellow, who had been dozing on a settle, sprang up as she passed him, and, pushing her down on it with one hand, caught the bully with the other by the scruff of the neck. "Out you go!" he said quietly. They could all hear Fistycuffs swearing, as he picked himself up on the outer side of the bolted door.

Then Julia, crossing the room in silence, reached down from the mantelshelf a brilliantly painted tumbler, "Love's Gift" in a wreath of forget-me-nots and roses, an heirloom, dusty with half-forgotten honour and long-buried affection. The others looked on.

Careless of their conclusions, she almost filled the undusted goblet. "Strong drinks to the strong!" she said under her breath.

"No more liquor for me," replied her champion, plunging both red hands into rusty pockets. The girl's eyes clouded with angry tears.

"Please yourself," she answered harshly and made as if she would have dashed her offering to the ground. But she only poured back the drink, with steady hand, into the great square jar beside her.

"Won't you let me get you something, Barend?" she questioned softly, and began polishing the painted flowers with a slip of her dirty apron.

"Get me first turn at the shaving," answered the young fellow; "I'm simply sick o' waiting here." He flung round on his heel, and again the angry blushes swept over Julias passionate face. "Me first, Joop!" cried Barend, "Julia says I'm to have first turn! I'm in a hurry, don't you see? Fistycuffs is waiting for me outside." All joined in his laugh, but mildly, not caring to remove their pipes.

The barber bent over his battered kettle and further very primitive apparatus. "To hear you go on, Barend Everts," said Sloop, "one'd think you were Rothschild or old Jan Hunkum!"

"Me!" Suddenly the young chap disclosed a pair of sleepy blue eyes.

"Yes, you," retorted the barber irritably. "I suppose you don't care to know—not you, nor nobody here present—about money being left 'em in a will—oh, no!" He started round with uplifted strap. The various countenances, scattered in the dusk of the paraffin-lamp, twitched.

"But surely Jan Hunkum's money is gone," interposed Jaap Avis nervously, protruding his big head from a cloud of smoke.

"So it is—stolen," replied Joop. "And what are the police for—pray—but to get it back again?"

A shout of derision rang out around the words. All their pent-up, disappointed cupidity poured down scorn on the police. A dozen recent undiscovered murders filled the air with a tumult of dispute. "Hush, hush!" remonstrated the barber, vainly holding up his hands. "Hush! Remember, the police——"

"Never see what isn't shown 'em," said a grim voice from a corner, "and all the better for every one

of us." There was an awkward lull, a general feeling of vexation.

"I wouldn't touch a penny of Hunkum's money—no, not if the police was to come and bring it me." Barend Everts settled himself in the shaving-chair. "You needn't sneer, for I wouldn't, Joop Sloop. I wouldn't touch money that the dirty Government gives you, with their testaments and notaries and God knows what! Nor I wouldn't let *any* man give me money. I'm no beggar, I! The little I want I can get for myself."

"Earn for yourself?" suggested the barber sweetly, flourishing the razor.

The other's ruddy face grew dark. "Yes, earn for myself, thank God."

"God?" repeated the barber.

"Father, hold your tongue!" broke in Julia's loudest tones. "Barend's never been hauled up for anything worse than poaching, and that's more than the best of your friends can say for you!"

Joop Sloop ran across to his daughter. "You fool!" he hissed. "But it isn't *me* you're hurting! Idiot!—to tell the whole room that you've lost your black heart to a lout who won't look at you!"

"What do I care if he won't look at me?" replied

the girl in a furious whisper—"as long as I can look at him!"

"Why, a poacher," suggested Jaap Avis smoothly, "a poacher's as much of a gent as any other sportsman. Money's the only difference between them, and money never made a gent, as the baron was wont to say."

"Well, the soap's cold," remarked Barend indifferently, still lying back, "you must make some fresh lather, Joop. And all for one cent. One'd think—but that all know better—it was you didn't care for tin. Well, whom has old Jan left his money to—the money he says he's no longer got?"

"Will you stand me a dram if I tell?" said the barber.

Jaap Avis threw down his florin. "I'll pay," he said. "So much," he added, mimicking the barber, "I owe our Cousin Jan."

Joop Sloop looked round the company. "Jan Hunkum," he began, amid a sudden deepening silence as in church—"Jan Hunkum has been and gone and done exactly what he threatened to. He's made a will. *I* was witness." Joop Sloop drew himself up and then resumed his shaving. "He's left his money between his heirs. Each'll get his

legal share 'as in their dotation,'* to use the proper legal phrase. So, when he dies—and die he must —all we shall have to do'll be to call on the notary for our legacies. But there's one condition—he said there would be"—Joop Sloop looked round triumphantly—"a sinecure now. Whoever can be proved to have entered his house, on any pretext whatever, after the date of the making of the will, loses all chance of touching a penny and remains disqualified for ever. So now you know. Amen." He recited these last sentences like a lesson and once more fell to rasping Barend Everts' chin.

"And no legacies specified?" Jaap Avis questioned anxiously. "No distinctions made? No favour shown?"

Joop Sloop smiled with leisurely enjoyment of the big lie he was going to tell. "Not a penny", he answered loudly. "Everything fair and square. Share and share alike, according to your Bible birthright."

Barend Everts broke away from under the knife. "'Tis a rascally shame," he cried, starting up. "A mean, beastly shame! Just the kind of low thing for one old scoundrel to do and another old scoundrel to boast about."

"Softly, softly," said the barber. "For shame,"

* "Ab intestato."

expostulated Avis. "Your father was a second cousin, same as me."

"'Tis a shame because it is a shame," retorted Barend Everts. "Like everything, that's a shame. And if I was Government, such things wouldn't be allowed. Though of course, if I was Government, I'd be as bad as Government is."

"He means Liza Brock," put in Julia from behind the bar. "He wants Liza Brock to have old Jan's money. And he wants to marry Liza Brock. Pity her name ain't Liza Hunkum, Barend? Sold, my boy! You'll have to marry her just as she is." She jingled the money in her bag. 'Twas only coppers.

The great simpleton stared right and left in angry amazement. Then he found natural relief in a tremendous oath, and fled, upsetting a chair, with the echo in his ears of inaudible laughter.

Outside in the darkness hung the grey November mist. The rustle of its unrelenting drip was everywhere. On the bare hedgerows, down the scraggy trees, along the tattered eaves. In the darkness the shiny globules formed and fell incessantly, the puddles gleamed across the slippery roadway: amid the windless silence all things seemed to listen for the next pat, and the next. The air was raw and

miserable. Barend stumbled on, for that was his way of walking. He never noticed damp.

He lighted a farthing cigar, the weight of his thoughts oppressing him. Active indignation confused his placidly discontented brain. He was one who took life easily, although, or more probably because, they feel, with a strong man's helplessness, that most things on earth are evil, especially the Powers that, irrevocably, Be. And he hated oppression, even of others.

He went on across the hazy fields, where a dim light twinkled here and there. Presently he stood still, in the dripping desolation, near a tumble-down pig-sty, and whistled. He whistled again, balancing himself against the fence of roughly-hewn firs, the rank steam rose around him. "Hang the girl," he said aloud. "I thought I was late enough!"

"So you were," cried a voice behind the pig-sty. "And I'd leave you to whistle a few minutes longer, Barend, if this weren't the first and last time you'll whistle for me." The girl came round the corner and confronted him. "Well, now," she said sullenly, "make haste. Pray, what may you want with me?"

"I want to tell you that I'm sweet on you," he answered sullenly too.

"You've told me that before," she retorted angrily. As angrily as a woman can. Not so very angrily.

"Well, it's as true now as then. Truer."

"And what did I answer you at the time?"

"You know," he said, kicking at the rotten fence.

"Well, that's as true now as then. Truer."

"Truer?" He caught at the word.

"Truer. Shall I tell you why?"

"Yes. Tell me."

"I won't. Not to-night, at any rate. I can't. Go away."

One of the pigs in the stye moved heavily. "And what should I marry you for?" the girl burst out, goaded by his sorrowful silence. "What have you to offer me, pray?"

There followed a moment of derisive exultation on her part, then Barend gasped forth painfully, with the air of a man who has put his own hand to his throat—"Liza, if you *really* wanted that, I—could make you a rich woman, Liza!"

She started at him curiously, peering forward, pursing up her lips. "Rich?" she echoed. "Real rich, Barend? Could you make it worth my while? With a blue silk dress and a servant-girl? Are you sure and certain, Barend, you could let me have a girl?"

"Sure," he answered. "And two silk dresses. Oh, Liza, were you really wanting that?"

"I should like to be rich," she said frankly.

Then she laughed shrilly in his face, and the next moment, quite seriously—

"So it was you took old Jan's money?" she said.

"No, I didn't. Though, perhaps, some day I shall."

The night-mist dropped all round them. And although he hardly knew it, his very heart was dark.

"From whom?" she asked breathlessly.

"Why—from old Hunkum." She gave a gasp of relief. "Take it from old Hunkum to give to you. For it isn't stolen yet."

"What do you mean? What do you know?" Her voice still trembled. "My God! who could rob that poor old man?"

"It isn't stolen, I tell you. Everyone says I'm a fool—I suppose I am. But I've seen through Jan Hunkum's trick at any rate. P'raps I see things by myself at times that only a fool can see. He's thought out a plan to secure himself against any of us trying to rob him. And that's where this will comes in—oh, your mother'll tell you about the will. He's got his money, never fear. 'Tis a cunning little plot that one fool has understood."

"I don't believe a word of it," the girl retorted

scornfully. "You are a fool; you know that everybody says so. And the florin?—how about Jaap Avis' florin? Could you ever think Jan Hunkum would throw a florin away?"

"I don't understand about the florin," replied the lover humbly.

"There, you see!" she cried in triumph. "I know Jan Hunkum better'n you! Don't I take him his bread every morning, regular? And he always says 'Good morning, Liza,' regular, which is more than he does to anyone else."

"Doesn't he ever say anything more?" asked Barend.

"Never anything more. He comes outside and he says—'Good morning, Liza,' and he takes his loaf and pays his pence and shuts his door, and I go on to my other customers. And if there's a change in the price of bread he always knows."

"And he's never said a kind word to you all these years?"

"Why should he say a kind word to me?"

He shrank back before the fierce defiance of her tone. "Do people in this hell of a place say kind words to one another? Love-making words, perhaps, or wheedling words to cheat a poor girl or to diddle your neighbour; but kind words!—kind!—I wonder

what they sound like! Psha!" She beat the ground with her foot, turning away.

"I'm sorry mine don't sound kind," he answered, more humbly than ever; "I mean 'em to."

"Psha!" she said again.

"But it does seem to me that Jan Hunkum ought to be special good to you. Special good. And he ought to leave his money to you, instead of wasting it on a lot of lazy cousins. I said as much this evening, speaking for myself at Joop Sloop's——"

"You said as much this evening at Joop Sloop's?" She came close to him, thrusting her clenched fists into his face. "Oh, you brute, you cowardly brute! I wish I was a man like yourself to thrash you for it! I hate you. To think of your insulting me like that before them all!"

"I didn't mention names," protested Barend.

"'Tis a lie, I tell you, a cowardly lie," she hurried on without heeding him. "Jan Hunkum's not my father. I'm as respectable as the rest of you: my father was my mother's husband; my name's Eliza Brock!" She spat out the words in the fury of her vindication, her great eyes glared through the moving mist. "My mother's a respectable woman!" she cried, "and I'm a respectable woman! Liars that

you are! I've always hated all of you! Brute! My name's Eliza Brock!"

"Yes, hush—hush, yes," he stammered, confusedly, bewildered by her violence. "Make it Eliza Everts, that's all I ask of you."

"Oh, hold your tongue," she answered, and all the fury had died out of the voice. "No, I won't make it Liza Everts, because——" She hesitated. "I wonder," she said reflectively, "shall I tell you because why?"

"No need," he said bitterly. "You've told me already. You want to be rich, and I'm poor." He flung away from her, out of sight.

III.

PRESENTLY he stopped. The hovel lay behind him, in the drizzle and the mist. He stood staring at nothing.

"Oh, she needn't because me no becauses. I felt the because in her voice, plain enough. Lucky fellow, whoever he is, d—— him. I wonder who it is?" He stumbled forward and, as he went, his footfall grew heavier under him, with deliberate resolve.

"No, not with all the money, she'd never have taken me," he reasoned, "she don't want the money for herself, I'd never believe it of Liza. She wants it for *him*. A hundred times I've wanted it for her. Well, things are altered now. As she wants it, I suppose she must have it. I'd better speak to Mary at once." He turned aside towards the yellow blur which encircled the barber's window. "Pleasant work, Barend, you fool," he thought, "finding the needy for a rival!"

From Joop Sloop's came sounds of quarrelling and cursing, the usual Saturday evening row. Just as Barend drew near, the door sprang open suddenly, and, through a broad torrent of lamplight and blasphemy, a glittering silver piece plashed in the mud at his feet.

"Cheat your own sort, if you can!" yelled the barber. "You won't get a soul in this place to believe that Jan Hunkum 'd give you a counterfeit coin!"

"And I swear 'tis the florin I picked up this morning," Jaap Avis retorted shyly. He appeared in the light of the doorway, staggering as if from some invisible impetus. "Hands off, you seller of counterfeit gin! Get the Government to grant you a licence, and don't talk of 'coiners' to me! And

give me my money back instantly! Give it me instantly, Sloop!"

"You can pick it up whenever you choose," rang the answer in Julia's metallic tones. "But you don't require it to pay me the twelve stivers you owe me —in coin of the realm!"

"It *is* a bad 'un," said Everts, who had been carefully testing the piece, "a fine bit o' work any man might be proud of." He pushed the florin into its owner's hand and entered the house. He understood the whole thing now with fresh admiration of old Jan's cunning. Jaap Avis, afraid to go in or go home, stood whining in the middle of the road.

"Where's Mary Brock?" asked Barend, peering into clouds of smoke. The louder women of the hamlet often look in on the Saturday shaving. "I can't tell why, for they let their beards grow," says the winking village constable.

"Here she is," cried Julia, whose red cheeks were empurpled with gin-fed emotion. "Here, Madame Mary Brock, here's Mr. Everts, Poacher. He's come to propose, in proper form, for the hand of your lovely daughter! He offers himself and all his traps."

"Hang you," said the violent-faced woman, and rose to her feet. Barend stood in the middle of the room, quietly contemplating Julia. "You're too clever

by half," he said. "What an awful thing it 'd be for both if *you* was to marry a fool." She looked straight up at him, her eyes grown suddenly tender. "See here," he hurried on, "I want to have a talk with Mary. Let us into your room—can't you?—here at the back."

"No—no—no!" she cried—the words sprang from her lips like a troop of barking dogs. "Go out into the roadway—it's raining—nobody 'd ever disturb you there, not even——" She laughed and, with a defiant flourish, filled up her half-empty glass.

"Now the Lord 'a mercy on me, Barend Everts, and what can you want with me?" said the woman Brock. "You don't expect me—surely—to help you make love to Liza?"

Barend answered her meaningly—"If it was love I'd been after I'd never 'a come to you." He reproached himself for those cutting words as soon as they had left his lips. It was Julia's example, he fancied, made him spiteful, not his overwhelming, overbearing wretchedness.

"Look here," he continued, coming close to her, "I'm going to do what you want me to. So shut up and go home."

A hot light filled her vehement eyes. "I don't understand in the least," she answered significantly;

"but I can't stand the smell in here any longer. So good night, Julia; have a chat with Barend. Lord bless you, I don't mind!" And she lifted up her nose on high.

"Barend'll please himself," retorted the irate damsel, "without asking advice of you, though you certainly *might* be his mother! But you ain't. No, nor his mother-in-law, as yet. Have out your secrets with him presently. Nice little secrets, I daresay!"

A hoarse laugh went up from all present: even the man under the knife grinned, with care.

Barend Everts sat himself down squarely, and called for a pennorth o' gin. "I thought you'd had liquor enough," exclaimed Julia, aflame with resentment. "Oh, bother," he answered crossly, "that was an hour ago." He sat contemplating his massive limbs, in dull repose. He was the strongest man in the room: he knew the fact, good-humouredly; but of what avail is the greatest strength that a womau's laugh can break?

He got up again and slouched out. In the doorway he looked at his watch. Five minutes to ten. As he went tramping back along the slushy road to the Brocks' outlying hovel, the distant chimes of Horstwyk faintly struck the hour.

About halfway, at a turn of the road, he heard

a couple of voices behind a hedge. "So, then, it's settled for twelve to-night," a man was saying. Barend stopped.

"And that'll teach the old skinflint to play us tricks," the speaker continued. "You see, the richest part of it is, he can't even run to the police. Why, hasn't he told us all that his money is stolen already? Then, how can anyone steal it to-night?"

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" laughed another voice. "He ought to have waited till to-morrow."

"Hush. Twelve, mind you. Look sharp." The principal speaker came breaking through the hedge as Barend noisily turned the corner. The two rivals challenged each other in usual peasant fashion, by a suspiciously spoken "Good-even."

"Fistycuffs," said Barend, "were you waiting for me? Better not fight: I'm the stronger."

"I'm not waiting to fight you," swore the bully, "I'm waiting for a girl."

In a lightning survey of the nearest cottages all possibilities flashed across Barend's brain. Liza's hut—thank Heaven!—was farthest off, a tumble-down shed by the dyke.

"I'm waiting for a girl," repeated Fistycuffs: "something must have happened, for she's always

before time. The hussy, to keep *me* waiting! I'll box her ears if she don't come soon."

"A nice girl she must be," said Barend, scornfully, passing him.

"So she is—so her mother thinks. And I. And —other people. I'm going to marry her some day, if I choose, so I don't mind telling you her name." He put himself in a posture of possible defence. "'Tis Liza Brock," he said. Barend faced round.

"Look here, you'd better fight me," he said gently. "Better take your licking that way."

"Fight! Who's talking of fighting?" Fistycuffs began to retreat in alarm. "Don't be a fool, Barend Everts! Why shouldn't I marry a girl that's in love with me? And, d—— me, I will!"

"Do," said Barend, dropping his arm. He hastily continued on his way.

Presently a shadow slipped past him, along the shiny hedgerow. He turned with a flood of scorn beating against his teeth. But he only called—

"Listen to me, Liza, a moment, please!"

She crept back sullenly, angry under this exposure. "I haven't time," she said, hurrying off.

"You're not really going to marry Fistycuffs?"

"Yes, I am. So now you know. Well—that's what I'd like to have lots of money for,"

"Hist! He won't make a good husband."

"He'll make a good husband to me."

"For why?"

"For why? Because I love him, Barend Everts. Can't you understand?"

"Hist! Don't speak too loud. Well, you *ain't* got the money at any rate. He'll have to wait a precious long time for that." Suddenly he resolved that *he* would not help her to secure this worthless prize. But he was a clumsy reader of woman's thoughts.

"You fool!" she answered. That was all.

"Liza, you only think you love him. For your own sake, Liza, wait a few months and make sure."

He was frightened by the fury this suggestion aroused in her. "What affair is it of yours," she cried, "why I marry and when? So mind your own business! I shall marry him in rags and be wretched, and love him for beating me because I'm as poor as himself! I shall love him because he's wicked and worthless, and brutal, and a bully! Just as I hate you because—because you're so good, and a fool!"

"Liza!" he cried with the cry of an animal in pain.

She buried her face in both hands, sobbing.

"I'm going to marry him in a fortnight's time," she murmured. "I wouldn't wait—if I could."

"Could?" In spite of himself his voice roughened.

"Aye! could. You talk as if you were some fine nobleman, instead of just Everts of the Hemel. Who are *we*—if you please?" She ran sobbing down the road.

"My God!" said Barend Everts. Perhaps it was the first prayer he ever uttered. He thought no other thought till he stood in Mary Brock's untidy room—the living-room and sleeping-room, the whole untidy dwelling.

Mary Brock sat on a three-legged stool by the roaring fire. She had borrowed, from some neighbour, an armful of stolen sticks: the room was far too hot. Her clothes were inevitably dirty, but she had smoothed them somewhat, and damped her untidy hair into still more noticeable disorder. By taking off her cap she had unwittingly imparted a naked look to her head and shoulders; about her surroundings there seemed a suggestion of putting to rights which made all the wrongs stand out.

"So!" she said in welcome. She pointed to a couple of bloaters which lay, a brilliantly golden spot, upon the dimly illumined table. "I got those for

you," she said. "Leastways, I was passing." He sat down in silence, filling his mouth with the fish.

"Well?" she said, without any sign of impatience. In fact, she had waited until she saw that he had quite done with the bloaters. "Well?" He lay back, wiping his lips. Suddenly she turned round on him, her black eyes ablaze.

"Oh, no, hang it," he answered, and thrust back his chair. "Why, Mary, I'm after your daughter! Leastways 'was.'" His great hands dropped beside his chair: everything about him seemed to fall.

She dashed a log into the fireplace, scattering sparks and ashes far across the room.

"You're just crazy!" he exclaimed roughly. "You always was. I can't help your being crazy. Look here, Mary! Can you listen to me, like a woman that's sane?"

"Not if you tell stories, you cheat!"

"I never told stories to you and I never cheated you. I've come about the paper. I always told you I should never use it."

"Then let me have it back to give to a better man than you."

"And this evening, at Joop Sloop's, I told you that I would."

"So, you see, you lied all along!"

He took no notice of her unreasoning spite, but continued calmly—"Everything's changed now. She don't want me. She wants money. She don't want me. That's certain."

"You might have known that six months ago."

"Well, I didn't. Not for certain. Not before to-night."

She kicked at the fire. "I'm glad," she said, "glad, glad!"

"No, you're not: I don't believe it. Oh, don't begin shouting at me. I know exactly what *you* wanted and haven't got."

He loosened his vest and, from some inner pocket, drew forth a faded pocket-book. Out of this he produced a bit of dingy paper. "Here it is," he said, spreading it carefully out upon the table and thereby adding a stain from his bloatered fingers. "Here it is, just as you gave it me six months ago." She snatched it up and made out the familiar words she could not have read—

"This is to certify that Widow Brock's daughter Eliza is my child, JAN HUNKUM." And the place, and the date.

"When you gave me that six months ago," continued Barend, "you called it Liza's dowry. You wanted me to use it against Jan Hunkum. All of a

sudden, one night, you put it into my hand. 'Here,' you said, 'here's Liza's dowry.' I was awful glad to have it, for I was awful sweet on Liza. Do you know why I was glad to have it? I'd have put it into the fire on the night of my wedding-day."

"Burnt it!" She rose, screaming. "Burnt it, you idiot! Burnt!"

"Bad names don't break no bones, Mary, but they don't, neither, sound as pretty as you seem to think they do. Well, there's not going to be no wedding-day—leastways, not for me. And if Liza wants money that I needn't share, she must have it —seems to me, she wants it quick! So let me see what I can do to help her. 'Tisn't a pleasant job, so I'll get it over at once."

"Barend," said the woman by the fire, "you was always mighty particular, but if so be that everything's over 'twixt you and Liza——"

"Hist!" he said imperiously. The woman started: her dark cheeks sank. When she spake again, her voice had changed to an accustomed beggar's whine. "And the poor thing never doubts but she's Luke Brock's lawful daughter, and he gone a year and more before her birth, and me a poor starving widow that 'did' for the wicked, wheedling, wealthy——" She stopped. "God!" she burst out, "Now that he's

lost his money, you come with your stupid—or, listen to me!"—her voice instinctively dropped to a whisper —"Did you take the money, Barend? You'll do the right thing by us. As soon as I heard, this morning, I thought that it must be you."

"Thank you," said Barend.

"But Liza!—she flew out in one of her rages! Barend, she says, 'll never catch nothing worth having but rabbits and hares."

"Did she say that?"

"Aye! she did. She knows what a fool you are."

Barend meditatively drew his finger through the grease of the empty dish.

"Give me a third—no, a quarter, Barend. Then you can keep the rest and the dockyment and Liza too."

Barend Everts stepped back roughly. "I haven't got the money," he said. "And I don't want—d——! I can't get—the girl. Can't you understand that I wouldn't take a penny from any man or woman living? 'Tis no fault of mine. I'm made that way."

"But you'd take hares," she interrupted spitefully.

"Now that it'll never be for me, in any case, I'll go to Jan Hunkum this night and get him to act a father's part to Liza, if I can. He's alive to-night, at any rate; the neighbours say he groaned all day.

P'raps he's ill. I don't believe about the robbery. And supposing he was to die to-night, where'd Liza be? Penniless!" His eyes grew wistful: he was thinking.

"She'd have all the money," said Mary Brock.

He stared at her. "You don't know Government," he said. "Government don't give poor folks money. By George, if Jan won't act a father's part to Liza, I'll tell him this bit o' paper'll be stuck up to-morrow morning on the door of Horstwyk Church!"

"The parson'd pull it off," said Mary. Barend smiled down at his huge fists.

"I shouldn't do it, in course," he said, "to bring shame on Liza. But 'tis a fair threat, and I hope it'll bring him round."

"What do you call a father's part?" said Mary.

"I dunno. *My* father's part was kicks."

"I'd do it better myself!" cried Mary, springing up in sudden doubt. "Always supposing the old rogue gets his money back! You're that good-natured and simple, you don't know money's worth. I'd— I'd always made up my mind to wait till the moment he was dead, then I'd have taken my dockyment straight to the Burgomaster, and he'd 'ave given me every penny of which my lawful daughter's father died possessed! She'll be a rich girl some day, will

my lawful daughter. That's why I wanted you to have her, Barend. And you could, if you chose."

"In course I could," retorted Barend moodily, "That's why she's sweet on Fistycuffs."

Mary Brock again kicked the faggots. "She's sweet on Fistycuffs, and when she's done being sweet on Fistycuffs, she'll want to marry you!"

"I'd thank you for no man's leavings."

"Please yourself. But when a man loves a woman like you love Liza, the best thing he can do is to love her for better and for worse. He can't help himself. Lor! 'Tis no man's leavings. Mark my word! she loves you—and she's in love with Fistycuffs. And if you weren't a fool, you'd take what you can get."

"And as I *am* a fool," he cried, banging his fist on the table—"Give me that paper back, and let me go!"

"Lord!" said the woman, in astonishment. Presently she held out the dirty scrap in silence. He took it, rose, and buttoned it out of sight.

"Never you talk," he said, "of taking this to Burgomasters. Once Jan Hunkum is dead, 'tis a bit of waste paper."

She made no reply, turning her back on him and on the light.

"'Cause I know," he continued, nettled. "For why? Once a man dies—in our class of life—his mother goes to the lawyers. My mother—she came from beyond the Rhine, you know—she had an aunt that died and left a hundred thousand guilders—a hundred thousand guilders. There was thirteen heirs turned up and seven lawyers, and in all the five years till mother died she got two thousand paid her—and oh, the heartsore and worry of getting that! She left it all in the Bank at Dordrecht, and two years later they wrote to say it had all got lost in shares! Shares for the lawyers, I s'pose they meant, and for themselves and Government. We never got a penny. Oh, that's why I hate the sight of a broadcloth coat in the streets, Mary. If it belongs to the man inside—he's stolen it!"

She took no notice.

In the doorway he stopped. "Kind thanks for the bloaters, Mary," he said, and, as she neither turned nor answered him, he slammed the door.

IV.

OUTSIDE, he looked at his watch, a great, absurd thing, like a tin bun. The dull flare from the clouded window fell across its face.

"Nearly eleven," he said, "and they settled for twelve."

The mist had thickened to a steady downpour. The ground was steaming; the desolate expanse, with its scattered hovels and black potato-plots, lay pitchy dark.

As he went along, Barend's thoughts were of the miscreants preparing to attack old Hunkum. Apparently they were pleasant thoughts, for he kept complacently slapping his heavy thighs.

Presently the yellow zone of gravel shone in front of him. He crunched across it towards the silent door.

He was about to knock, but checked himself. The old man inside was stone deaf, when he chose, and would certainly never open, however plainly he might hear. An intending visitor, at this hour—or at any other, unless the man had been invited—could only obtain admittance by forcing his way in. Barend passed slowly round the little house, inspecting its irresponsive shutters. Foolishly enough, he had not foreseen this difficulty. The faint chimes from Horstwyk steeple came thrilling through the night.

At the back of the house, by the kitchen-entry, was a little window, with bars outside. Before this he stood half a minute, meditating; then, with a swift clench of boths fists, he tore one of the bars toward him. It came away shrieking, amongst a shower of

splinters from the broken window-frame. One moment he waited, gasping for breath. Then he wrenched out a second bar, and a third; the great beads of perspiration stood cold upon his forehead. With the formidable weapon he now held in his hands he struck aside the glass panes and the shutter behind them, and so passed into a tiny pantry, groping his way amongst empty shelves.

He listened, expectant. Amidst the swash of the rain outside a sudden creak of timber told him how undisturbed the stillness of the house remained. He found no difficulty in forcing the lock of the pantry door, and so obtained admittance to the passage, also dark. Here he hung back, for the awe of the living silence fell upon him.

"Over yonder's his bedroom door," he reflected. "How early the old man goes to bed. And to sleep? Old people don't sleep much, they say. Surely this one shouldn't." He hated Liza's father, with all the contempt of a diametrically opposite nature. Indolence and wastefulness were the faults he condoned.

He pushed along the wall to the door through which he had passed that morning with all the rest. It was a queer thought that here he was burglariously entering Jan Hunkum's house, to protect Jan

Hunkum's property on every Hemeler's behalf except his own!

And now, as his fingers touched the handle, he felt that his night's work was going to begin. There was no light whatever visible from the inside. Presumably, therefore, the room was as dark as the rest of the house. Or was it possible so laboriously to close up all the chinks that not a ray could pierce panel or shutter? Was it thinkable that, behind this enclosing blackness, there should be light and life? Perhaps, even now, the old man, sitting up in the great green bedstead, was watching with dilated eyeballs each twist of the door-knob? The suspense of these invisible eyes became unbearable to Barend: he flung his full weight against the door, and, as it broke away before him, he fell forward into the middle of the room.

A bright lamp stood on the table by the bed. Jan Hunkum sat erect, against the pillows, without sign of hurt or sickness, his skinny red face in a tremble, the grey locks, under the knitted nightcap, dark upon his contorted brows. On the table lay piled a heap of papers, under the glare of the lamp —business papers, mortgages, bonds—some of them had fallen to the floor beside a gaping money-chest; others mingled on the counterpane with bundles of

banknotes and a glitter of scattered gold. The intruder started back before the agonised appeal of the old man's motionless stare.

"I haven't come to hurt you!" he shouted. "Haven't come to rob you, don't you hear?" There was no response whatever. "Haven't come to rob you," he repeated, "rob you, rob you." Old Hunkum lifted a shaky finger and pointed to the iron bar. Barend dropped it impatiently, from his unconscious grasp, on the foot of the great green bed.

He drew nearer to explain his object, and in doing so struck against the open chest, evoking a gentle jingle from its depths. The miser shrieked in eager response and flung himself across the widespread treasures in front of him, his hooked fingers gathering up banknotes and tumble-down piles of metal, in a vain endeavour to cover them all, as a hen her too numerous brood. The nightshirt fell open from his panting chest; his whole face was now working; his scream died away to a crooning appeal still more piteous to hear.

"Now, listen to me," cried Barend, bending over him. "Listen to me, Jan Hunkum, and do as you please. But I've come to help you—to help you, so help me God! Do you believe me now? In less than an hour a couple of scoundrels will be here—

burglars—coming to rob you—coming to kill you. And I'll help you—do you hear me?—against them —help you."

The old man still bent forward, staring his terrified, unmeaning stare, and impotently raking the counterpane.

"There's no time to lose, so I'd better be very plain," continued Barend, bending his burly form between Hunkum's face and the lamp. "I'll help you to keep your confounded cash, but, by Heaven, if I do, Jan Hunkum, you must make an honest use of a little of it at last! I've got in my pocket here"—he slapped his chest—"the paper you wrote for Mary Brock. Liza's *your* child, Jan Hunkum. I don't want to call an old man names, but twenty years ago—I *will* say that—you weren't a better man than you are to-day. Liza's your child, bought with *bread!* If you want to keep the rest of all this stuff here you said was stolen, you must give me an honest lump of it—a good, fair, honest lump of it—for your daughter Liza to-night!" He caught up a handful of bank-notes and scattered them loosely over the floor.

Then Jan Hunkum found rapid speech. "Pity a poor old man," he said hoarsely. "Have mercy on a poor old man, a poor old man." His visitor stood looking down on him, with squarely-folded arms.

"Liza Brock's going to marry," Barend said. The old man cast up at him a quick leer of contemptuous penetration. "She's going to marry," Barend continued steadily, "a good-for-nothing brute. As long as she's able to support him, he won't ill-treat her. So you must settle the money on your daughter—say ten thousand guilders—you must give them me to take away to-night. You're not listening: I don't believe you hear me. It doesn't matter." He raised his voice. "Ten thousand florins to-night, at once, for your daughter Liza—or I leave you to your fate!"

"Have pity on a poor old man," said the miser.

"Leave you to be robbed of every penny lying here—and you will be!" Barend forgot his professed respect for old age. "And why shouldn't I, you thief?" he cried. "Why shouldn't other thieves have as much right to the gold as you?" He unloosened his arms. His eyes flashed.

"To all my relations, when I die," mumbled the miser. "To you, and the rest. You're my cousin also, Barend Everts. First cousin once removed. I'm an old man. I only want to die in peace."

"You lie," said Barend sternly. "By entering this house to-night, I have given up all chance of any share in your inheritance. I know it; we all know it. You lie." He picked up a ten-guilder note. "I don't

want your dirty money," he added, slowly. "Some small share—as much as this?—would have come to me some day, I suppose. Let me have it now, so you may see for yourself what I do with it!" He waved the flimsy scrap of paper over the lamp. To his astonishment the old man leaped aloft and fell upon him, tearing it away.

"Gently," said Barend, stepping back.

"It's blackmail!" cried Jan Hunkum furiously. "It's infamous imposture and robbery! Why don't you kill me at once and have done with me? Take all the money and kill me and go, you hulking beast of a poacher!"

For answer Barend drew forth his precious document and held it on high. "Do you recognise this or not?" he asked. "Do you dare to deny that Liza is your child?"

The miser sank back among his pillows. "I deny nothing," he said. "I'll leave her ten thousand guilders. I'll leave her twenty thousand. Be a good husband to her. I'll leave *you* twenty thousand guilders. Go away now. I'll make a new, expensive will."

"She shan't wait till you're dead!" exclaimed Barend, brandishing his document. "For one thing, she'd never get a penny! Once you're dead, all your

money will go to the notaries and Government. That's a pleasant reflection—the notaries and Government. So now, while you've got it, give a little to your daughter that needs it! Your daughter that's in rags and in —give it her! Give it her at once!" He began passionately shuffling the papers that lay on the table; his broad shadow darkened the bed. "I see you don't believe a single word of all that I've been saying. It's true, all the same, and I'll settle those fellows for you in a jiffy. But you give me the money for Liza! Look here; I don't understand about these papers."

He did not perceive that the old man's arm went stealthily gliding down to the bed-foot, down to the iron bar which lay there. "Now, for instance, tell me honestly, what is this bundle worth?" He turned, and, in turning, sprang aside: the heavy bar came whizzing past him; his arm, thrown up in hasty self-defence, upset the petroleum lamp. With a crash it exploded, amongst a sudden blaze of papers: the yellow flames ran up the thin green curtains of the bed. The miser's murderous weapon clanged upon the money-chest; the old man himself, borne down by the weight of his futile blow, fell forward, right into the flames. He did not seem to feel or, if he felt, to regard the spread of the swift

conflagration, but plunged frantically deeper, his naked arms outstretched, clutching at the charred fragments that sailed away everywhere around him on broadening rivers of fire, while from his lips all the time broke a rapid succession of moans like the plaint of a wounded beast. Barend, in his first bewilderment, had run to the washstand, ignorantly seeking fuel for the furnace: to his open-mouthed amazement it seemed like a judgment from Heaven that water should cause flames to increase! But after a moment of stupefied staring, he flung himself into the burning mass and dragged out the old man, who shrieked and struck wildly again and again in the fierceness of unavailing resistance, amid the crackle of paper and the clatter of gold. Desperately fighting his way to the bed, Barend tore himself loose from the miser's clutches, and sprang to pull down the blazing hangings and to cast the dead blackness of the bedclothes—the counterpane, the mattresses, the coat off his own back—across the abysm of flame and smoke. In another moment it was all over. He stood, uncertain, in utter darkness and dirt.

Presently he struck a match, and found a tallow candle, and, coughing away the clouds around him, he looked round. Jan Hunkum lay on the floor, his right hand once more fiercely clasping the murderous

iron bar; his eyes were closed: there was a splatter of blood all about him.

Barend Everts knew nothing of sickness, and little of death. His father had been shot in a poaching affray; his mother had died in a fit: for the rest, his pathological experiences were confined to the animal world. When a hare had a hole like that behind its ears it was done for. He gently turned the old man on his back again: the eyes were dull; the breath had stopped. Jan Hunkum was dead: he, Barend Everts, was somehow mixed up with his death. The miser must have fallen—perhaps in taking fresh aim? —and in falling must have struck against a corner of the chest. But what did these particulars matter? When Government finds a man killed and a live man beside him, it says that the live man has murdered the dead one—at least, if the live man's poor.

There was no more to be done for Jan Hunkum. Barend rose slowly to his feet and ran from the room.

He struck his elbow against the wall of the passage—he struck his face against the wall of the pantry —at last he was out of the window, out in the rain.

He tried to understand what had happened. His heart throbbed into his brain. He couldn't, and once more he hated himself for a fool. It was he who had upset the lamp. He wondered: had he murdered Jan

Hunkum twice—from a legal point of view? Did they punish you twice, if so? He knew nothing of legal subtleties, except that they invariably exculpate the wealthy and inculpate the poor.

He wished the night was darker. It was horribly, brutally light. He could not remain standing there on the shiny gravel: the whole world was watching him, before and behind—especially behind—from a thousand staring eyes. He flung himself to the ground and crept, on hands and feet, across the soaked potato-fields.

He laboriously reached a plantation of oak brushwood, and in a dry ditch alongside it sank panting. Baronial brushwood, he reflected bitterly—anxiously. The Great—the Government—the vague, ever-present Oppressor! He looked down at his clothes, at his hands. He was all over slimy clay, miserably dirty. A good thing he had on his grey work-a-day shirt, not to-morrow's shiny white one. Yonder, that twinkle far down along the ditch was Liza's hovel. Jan Hunkum was dead. Well, Fistycuffs might come and take the money now. He, just as well as the Government.

V.

"But you love me, Fisty?"

"Yes."

"Say you love me, then!"

"In course I love you, confound you."

"Kiss me, then."

"Not I. Not as long as you call me Fisty."

"But, Ferdy, I like to call you Fisty. It sounds strong. Like as if you could beat me."

"So I could beat you. And so I will, if you go on forgetting my name's Ferdinand."

"Could—could!" She drew herself up haughtily, and leisurely inspected her naked brown arm. Then she fell back into her former tone. "Don't be disagreeable, Ferdy. I love you so. If you only loved me as I love you!"

He shook himself impatiently. "And what am I marrying you for?" he said. "Your money, I suppose?"

"Don't, Ferdy. You'd like me to have money, shouldn't you?—I wish I had; I wish I had."

Her voice grew miserable, for the shadow crossed her soul of a love which longed for gold—to give it her!

He had been lolling against the pig-sty; his manner suddenly grew businesslike. "Why, what a fool I am!" he said. "I never thought of it before! Look here, you're as strong as a man, Liza—though I could lick you with half a hand—you could do a man's work any day, couldn't you?"

"Couldn't I?" said Liza proudly. "And—what's more!—when we're married, I will. "I'll work for you all day long, Ferdy, like mother worked for father, and Aunt Judy works for uncle, and——"

"Oh, shut up, do," he interrupted impatiently. "You women always talk as if we did nothing. As if watching all night for rabbits were nothing, with the beastly moonlight, and all the risk, and things! But I didn't want to bother about that. Curse the stupid chatter. Look here, Liza Brock, you want to marry me, don't you?"

"I do," she said, and took his hand and kissed it.

He shook her off.

"And the sooner the better?"

"The sooner the better, indeed!" Her voice trembled. She folded her hands in front of her.

"Then the sooner we've got the necessary funds, the better for us both," he said doggedly. "I'm not going to marry you till then, mind that."

"I haven't got any money, and I can't get any,

Ferdy. I shouldn't know how. But once we're married, I'll —"

"Oh, stop your confounded bleating. It's *I* will get the money, but you can lend a hand. I'm going to leave this confounded hole and take you with me. I'm going to be a fine gentleman, Liza, and you shall be a lady. The thing'd have been done by now but that long-armed Pete—the funk!—pretended he heard a noise. No matter: he won't split: there'll be all the more for us."

"It *is* late—past twelve," said Liza nervously. "I must be getting back through the window. Mother will find me out."

"What, you funking too!" cried the man with a thunderous oath. "Look you here: I haven't called you out for any fooling, mind you. Listen to me. You must help me to-night, to get Jan Hunkum's money. It's a beastly shame, this new-made will of his, that everyone's talking about!—wasting all his money where it can't do nobody no good. *We'll* get it, and away to America to-morrow! I shall have to give something to Pete, I suppose, and he and his noises be hanged."

He had listened to his own voice in speaking. A long silence ensued.

"I'm not a thief," said Liza, almost inaudibly.

"Aren't you? Well, then, you're a thief's wife. I could do it by myself, if I didn't feel a bit uncomfortable about that creepy noise."

"Oh, Fisty, don't. There's no money, Fisty. Why, it was stolen away last night—you know it was—and old Hunkum half murdered. Didn't you see him this morning, with his head done up in bandages? There isn't any money there—I know there isn't—there isn't——"

He struck at her, and she started back. "Hold your jaw, you fool!" he blustered. "I can see through the cunning old devil, if you cannot. Nobody can among these drunken idiots, and that's my chance! Fetching the plunder away to-night's as safe as safe can be. He can never say he's been robbed to-night, for there's nothing left to take!" He laughed.

"I don't care. I'm not a thief," said Liza Brock. And she added in a lower key—"Supposing I was, of all the people in the world, I wouldn't rob Jan Hunkum."

"Whew!" said Fistycuffs. Then he burst out—"So that's what you flaunt in my face, do you? A nice respectable sort of person you are to have moral sentiments! Why, you idiot, it's *no* robbery in your case; that's where the moral sentiments comes in! It's taking your own—what belongs to you—from an

unnatural old wretch who wants to waste it upon strangers. That's what I feel all along. Now that I'm going to marry Jan Hunkum's daughter, it's my duty to her—to you, don't you see?—to secure the inheritance of which he's defrauding her." He mispronounced the word "defrauding," but he rolled out the whole long sentence like a much-repeated task.

A horrible light flared up in her heart, but she beat it down. "It's a lie!" she exclaimed. "No, I don't mean that, Ferdy, but you do worrit one so! It's all a lie got up against mother and me. It's all Aunt Judy's doing, the hateful, spiteful thing! Mother's as honest as the best of them. I don't say she don't drink! I don't say she don't swear! That'd be silly of me. But she's honest—do you hear?—as the best of them! I like Jan Hunkum, 'cause he says 'Good day' to me, mornings, regular, when I take round the bread. That's his way of being kind. And I won't have him robbed, so there!"

"You won't, will you? You won't? Take that." His patience was overwrought; he stepped forward and slapped her cheek with the full force of his open hand.

"Don't," she said. "Don't, Ferdy!"

"Will you come with me up to Jan Hunkum's, or will you have some more?"

"I'll have some more," she said.

He struck her again and again, till, wearied of his blows, or perhaps inflamed by them, she ran upon his breast, between his open arms. Under their double weight, as they stumbled backwards, the wretched door of the pig-shed swung open, and together they rolled into the litter, among the pigs. For a moment they struggled there amidst grunts and squeakings: then, suddenly, she started up, leaped through the dim light of the entry, and shot the outside bolt. "Promise not to go near Hunkum to-night!" she gasped, one hot cheek against the door.

His answer was a volley of oaths.

"Promise me," she pleaded. "Promise, Ferdy!"

"I'll promise to murder him the moment I get out," he shrieked. "And I'll black your black eyes till they're blue!"

"Promise me," she pleaded—" promise, Ferdy!"

"Let me out this instant, you hussy," was the only answer she received.

"I can't allow you to hurt Jan Hunkum," she repeated desperately, with her hand on the bolt. She ran away from the door and ran back to it, half mad with alarm and uncertainty. She could hear him hitting the lumbersome swine in his rage, as he

shouted and swore. Furious, he called out to her the whole villany of his lovemaking: the report, picked up in a tavern, that Jan Hunkum had made her his heiress, the sudden alarm of the pretended robbery, the discomfiture of to-night's new will! She stood trembling as the wave swept down on her; she sank on her knees. "Promise me," she repeated mechanically. "Don't, Ferdy, don't! I love you!" She had never learnt to pray, but she cried out to God to influence—somehow—Fistycuffs. Not that she believed He could do it. "Promise me! Promise me!" she cried; her voice was hoarse with yearning. Gradually the useless petition died away: she lay against the door in the drizzle, with a sickness swelling at her throat. Presently a human grunt arose among the swinish ones, a grunt which steadied to a snore. Fistycuffs had fallen asleep, his head on a rough pink belly. She lay listening, and, in the general appeasement, her own passion sank to rest.

When she awoke, it was early dawn, grey, grizzly. Her mother was standing over her, abusing her violently, with occasional kicks, like commas. She started to her feet.

"Slut!" said Mary Brock, half a dozen times in

quick succession, with evident enjoyment of the hateful word. "Bring down disgrace on your respectable mother by the life you lead! That I should have lived to behold such a daughter! I was respectable."

"Hush, hush, mother; I know you was." Liza looked round confusedly. "I like you for it. Well, I'm not. Well, I can't help it. A good many people aren't. In these parts at any rate."

"At least say it was Fistycuffs?" questioned Mary with real interest.

"Of course it was Fistycuffs!" exclaimed Liza, aflame. "Mother, what do you take me for? He came by the window, near midnight, and I just slipped out for a talk. When he went away, I leant, thinking, against the pig-sty, and I must have fallen asleep."

"More fool you," said Mary Brock. "Well, come away. It's Sunday, you stupid: you've got to be half an hour earlier to-day."

"Don't I know?" replied the girl peevishly. She crept away to the house. Ten minutes later she looked into the pig-sty apprehensively: it was empty.

She earned her living by trudging round, twice daily, with her heavy basket of baker's bread. Twice a day she had to fetch it, first from Horstwyk, the village which lies three miles away. What with cross-

ing and recrossing the potato-fields, in a continuous zig-zag, her daily perambulations from cottage to cottage must have filled eight hours or more. She was proud, with sullen pride, of working amongst a hundred loafers, and especially made it a point of honour, and of all-absorbing interest, to secure unwilling settlements from the most insolvent customers. For the Hemelers, too lazy to bake their own supply of bread, were still less anxious to pay for it. The girl, hardly able to read and oblivious of early pothooks, scratched together mysterious accounts which completely bewildered the baker, in all but their final satisfactory result.

On Sundays she had to be half an hour earlier, so that her customers might eat their breakfast tranquilly before they went to church. They always ate their breakfast tranquilly. They never went to church.

This Sunday morning she started along the straight long road, between the straight tall poplars, thinking, thinking, all the way to Horstwyk, how she could possibly save Jan Hunkum from her lover. She shivered in the naked November silence that lay pale across the shivering earth. The dawn spread white and thin, like an ancient virgin whose locks no longer hide the baldness underneath.

She was not afraid of Fistycuffs, for she fancied

that, whatever he might do to her, she should rather like his doing it. Supposing he killed her? She shut her eyes, along the bare blank road, and tried to feel him killing her. But he mustn't hurt Jan Hunkum. No, above all, she must warn Jan Hunkum.

Presently he would come out to her, as he always did, for his hump of rye-bread. He got special daily fractions nowadays, his toothless gums having quite refused to masticate the cheap stale bread he had bought so long. He would come out and he would say—"Good morning, girl," and then he would go in again. Must she catch him by the tail of his coat and cry—"Beware of Fistycuffs?" No, never Fistycuffs. "Jan Hunkum, they don't believe you've been robbed already. Somebody's coming to rob you soon. They'd have been here to-night but that somebody stopped them. Somebody? Who? Somebody?—I!"

She could not say so much. She could not say enough. One question would lead to another. The police would get mixed up in the matter. She would end by betraying Fistycuffs.

Her heart stood still. She must save Jan Hunkum.

She cared nothing for the miser. Rather, she disliked him for the rumour which mixed up with his, in shameful promiscuity, her mother's good name and her own. But he had spoken civilly to her through

all these years; moreover, he had always paid. Few of the Hemelers did either. Besides, Jan Hunkum had rough words for everyone he spoke to, excepting her.

So she plodded on her daily round till his turn came. Then she resolutely walked towards the gravel-plot. She would trust to the intuition of the moment.

As she neared the shiny little house, in the rawness of the grim November morning, she watched to see the green door open, and the old man totter out. Nothing stirred. It was cold this morning—*she* never minded weather; but the old man was growing feebler: perhaps she might be a trifle early. With a calm beginning of surprise she knocked.

She knocked again—and waited. And then before that unaccustomed irresponsiveness a sudden terror flashed across her brain. Supposing Fistycuffs —during her culpable slumbers—had got away and done the deed!

She shrieked aloud and, without thought of the laden basket on her arm, began tearing round the cottage. In another moment she halted, breathless, ashamed, her basket empty, its contents scattered right and left. Very contritely, she stooped to collect them, although she knew by this time that something must indeed have happened inside the silent house,

for not even her crazy conduct had caused its single inhabitant to stir.

She soon found the little back window, with the black bars lying under it. One was missing. Then she knew that for the first time in her life she was face to face with crime—with what she would consider crime. She stood away from the walls, and the walls stared back at her. A fit of trembling seized her. "It is behind us," said the walls. "It is horrible. No wonder you feel afraid."

She sank on her knees. She *was* afraid. Though she could hardly have said of what. Not of meeting burglars.

Presently she fancied she heard a sound inside the house. She looked up, listening. The air was so still, she held her breath. And then she knew she had heard it again, low and distinct—a groan!

She started to her feet. Two men stood watching her, beside the peat-shed, their figures clear against the morning light. She stared into their faces.

"Oh, Ferdy!" she gasped.

"Let's call somebody," he answered, white as she. "Let's go home." He seized her by the arm. "Come away!"

"No!" she answered, fiercely resisting him. "No! No! No!" He read the terror in her eyes.

"It's no doing of mine!" he cried. "I swear it isn't! Whatever it is, 'tis no doing of mine! How could it be when you kept me locked up in that beastly place till daybreak? Here, Pete, swear we've got nothing to do with it. God, there it is again!"

"Hush," said the girl, shuddering. "I don't care for Pete's oaths. Nor for anybody's oaths. Look me in the face, Fisty, before we go in, and say it wasn't you!"

"It wasn't——" began Fistycuffs. "Confound it, what do you mean by 'going in?' Hark, there it is again!"

"I'm going through the window," said the girl.

"No: you're not," he cried, in a fury. "Nor are we—eh—are we, Pete? You've forgot about the will: that's like you, Liza! From the cottages a dozen eyes may be watching us; if you're seen to go inside, you lose your money, once for all."

Liza picked up her bread-basket and stood reflecting. Should the miser die, she would be rich. Often and often her mother had boasted that Hunkum's death would prove Liza to be his heiress, his nearest relative, his—niece. She understood nothing about the laws of inheritance. She fully believed in the "niece."

In a few hours then, possibly, she would be rich.

Jan Hunkum had probably been plundered, but of course the police would recover the treasure. And, in any case, as Barend Everts had remarked last night, rich people might be robbed of much, but they couldn't be plundered poor.

She would be rich. She wanted to be rich. Fisty-cuffs would marry her then and be good to her.

She dropped her basket and looked at him. The moan from the cottage seemed to pass between them.

"I'm going through the window," she said.

He sprang at her with an oath. "Never," he cried, "never while I live. Here—help me, Pete!" Unconsciously, it seemed to her, she struck out at him, straight from the shoulder, toppling him over, motionless, flat on his back.

Then she dragged herself up through the window, without as much as a glance at hang-dog Pete.

The whole house was full of smoke and burning. Disconcerted at this, she went back to the pantry, and took up a knife from where it lay beside the miser's untasted supper of bread and fat. She noticed that the few objects on the shelves were clean and tidily arranged. For, in contrast with the horde of his relations, Jan Hunkum was neat.

She walked quickly into the bedroom, her knife in her hand.

The bedroom was dimly dark, full of fumes and smell. And Jan Hunkum lay stretched across the floor. So much she saw in entering. She shuddered back to the door, for fear of a possible assassin concealed in the darkness, watching. The next moment she flung herself boldly across to a window, drew a bolt, raised a bar, turned back a shutter: a chink of grey light fell thin across the floor.

All the time she faced round to that heap in the middle, to the centre of all her considerations, the moan. Jan Hunkum lay amongst the disorder of wraps and bedclothes, with his treasures scattered about him. She had never seen gold before. For a moment the sight caught her breath. Jan Hunkum's fortune, then, had neither been invented nor carried off. Gold! Here was the one thing all men lived for. Jan Hunkum was dying for it.

She knelt beside the old man, resolutely, and perceived with surprise that his fingers clutched, in an attitude of attack, the missing iron bar. She loosened them with difficulty and pushed the bar aside.

Jan Hunkum's eyes were closed; he was probably but semi-conscious. As she tried to lift him up, he shrieked, and she saw that his naked arms and breast were terribly burnt. She propped up his head, and

went for some water, dazed, wondering if water was good for burns.

She could do nothing. Whenever she touched him, he screamed. "Alone!" he murmured several times. His eyes remained closed.

She sat down on the floor beside him, helpless, and her eyes mechanically wandered across a crumpled scrap of paper that lay open in the twilight. She thought it was money, like all the rest.

I hereby certify that Liza Brock is my daughter.
JAN HUNKUM.

She read it over and over again, dully wondering what it meant, while yet she had instantly realised every word. She got upon her feet again, and stared down at her father.

She hated him with a hate that suddenly filled her whole soul like a furnace. She clenched her fists tight, lest she should strike at the upturned face. She would have rejoiced to fall upon him and tear out his wicked grey hair and beard; she would gladly have stamped on his prostrate body. The fury of her denial swept across her like a storm. She bent both hot cheeks down to his.

"Can't I do anything for you?" she said softly. "Not anything at all?"

At the sound of her voice he opened his eyes, and recognised her. He saw the paper she clutched in one hand—Barend Everts' "document." Their glances met.

He struggled to say something, between his groans. It was a piteous something, by the piteous expression of his disfigured features; he struggled, for a moment, with the vehemence of despair. Then, suddenly, she saw the eyeballs roll up as the head fell back, and the whole body collapsed. She had never seen death before. Horror-struck, she knew it at once.

She stood motionless. Presently she burst into a torrent of indignant outcries. "It's a lie! It's a lie!" she repeated again and again, in the presence of the dead man, as if to shame him. She tore the palms of her hands with her teeth. "It's a lie! It's a cowardly, devilish lie!" But the conviction had gone from her voice.

"Well!" she said aloud, with desperate resolve, "if I'm—his daughter, I can marry Fistycuffs. All this money's mine, I suppose." Her voice dropped. "I wonder what's the worth of a bundle such as this? I'm the richest woman in the neighbourhood." She pushed aside some of the confusion around her, drawing the bed-clothes over the body in decent covering. And out of the tangle she disengaged the remnants

of a broken petroleum lamp and also a half-soaked pea-jacket.

She snatched at the latter with a cry. It wasn't Ferdinand's, thank God! Yet she fancied she had seen it before. It belonged to Barend Everts.

Barend! The whole thing flashed upon her. Barend had come here and done this deed, because she had told him how much she wanted money. For her sake he had killed Jan Hunkum, little dreaming that she was indeed Jan Hunkum's child. Perhaps the old man had produced the paper? Perhaps—more probably—Barend had never heard of it. However that might be, it was her ignoble greed that had killed her father for his gold.

"Not I," she murmured miserably, hiding her face in the sodden pea-jacket. "Ferdinand, Ferdinand," —and she found herself pitying Barend, the murderer.

Somebody stood watching her; his eyes drew up hers to his face. She sprang away from him. "You did it, Barend!" she cried. "You! You! Murderer!"

He did not answer, staring stupidly. Through the gloomy half-light she could see something of the condition he was in. His clothes and hands were caked with clay; his head was bare.

"You've killed him," she continued, "a poor helpless old man. All the world shall know how brutally

you killed him. I shall tell. They will punish you —dreadfully. And I—I——" She stopped. Would she be glad?

"And you will marry Fistycuffs," he said drearily. He stepped forward to take up the jacket.

"No," she said. "That is part of my evidence."

He turned on her, gently withal. "You won't need evidence," he said, "I'm my own evidence. I'm going to give myself up."

For a moment she stood silent. Then she burst out—"Don't do that! For God's sake, don't do that! Don't you know that the people who give themselves up are always condemned?"

"I know," he answered. "When Government gets hold of you, it doesn't let you go. Especially if you're innocent," he added bitterly.

"But you're *not* innocent!" she cried quickly. "Oh, I can't bear the thought of it. Go!"

Again he looked at her. "You really feel quite sure I killed your father?" he said. The new word caused her to wince. "Well, perhaps I did," he added. "It don't really matter much. I shall give myself up to the constables, and you can marry Fistycuffs."

She came after him. "I can't help it. I don't understand at all. I love Fistycuffs. I always knew

you were the better man. And now you've killed my father. He *was* my father, Barend. I'm not even a respectable girl. I hate him, though he's dead. Perhaps that's why I can't be as angry with you as I ought to be. I know 'tis very wicked. But Fistycuffs is going to marry me. He *must,* Barend!"

"Yes." He stopped in the pantry door.

"Barend, you can't leave the house. He's outside."

"If so, he saw me climb through the little window. I *had* to come back and see after the old man. I couldn't help myself. But I'm not afraid of Fistycuffs."

"Barend, say you didn't do it because of anything I said!"

"Didn't do what? Oh, yes, all right. I didn't do it because of anything you said."

"Barend—listen! Listen! Don't give yourself up!"

He did not answer; already he was climbing to the window.

"For my sake!" she pleaded wildly. "Don't say anything! Wait and see!"

"For your sake?" He smiled drearily. "Very well. I don't understand what's really happened.

Not a bit. But, then, I'm a fool. For your sake? Very well. Good-bye."

She was once more alone in the house with the dead man. She forced herself to go back for one last look at him, her father. The pea-jacket lay on the floor, forgotten. She took it up and, fastening it round her waist as best she could, clumsily hid it away. She crept out of the house, crying. She had not been in it more than a quarter of an hour.

She took up her bread-basket, looking around her. At first there was no sign of Fistycuffs. Daylight had come. To which of the distant cottages should she bear the news?

Fistycuffs stole from behind the kitchen wall. "It's stopped," he whispered. "Well?" Then he added immediately: "Come away off the gravel, you fool. Come behind the house."

"There's no danger," she answered, slowly following. "On Sundays none of 'em wakes till I calls 'em. There's only Jan Hunkum I have to go to first, this side." She shuddered.

"And you won't wake *him,*" said Fistycuffs. "Liza, you might just as well have done it with *me*. *I* didn't mean murder. Is the money there, I say? How much of it did you bring away with you? Hang it, you jade, what were you doing in there with Everts?"

"Did you see him?" she cried in alarm.

"Blood and thunder, what do you mean?" he cried. "See him? I'll tear your heart out! One of his friends knows who the murderer is! All the worse for the murderer!"

"Hold your tongue," she said, outwardly calm. "When Barend came, Hunkum was dead. I'm going over yonder to give the alarm."

"To give the alarm that you found the house closed!" he cried with ill-checked excitement. "Have you again forgotten, fool, that it's ruin to have been inside?"

"No, I haven't," she made answer. A dogged something in her voice and expression disconcerted him.

"Don't expect me to marry you," he said brutally, "unless you get your share."

"Ferdy!"—suddenly she flung herself at his feet —"you won't marry me anyhow, Ferdy."

"I can see!"—he grinned; "that's why there's such a hurry about this marriage." His voice changed. "Curse it! Everts?" he said.

She rose to her feet. "You are mad," she said, not less fiercely. "I mean that my mother—that I *am* Jan Hunkum's daughter. I can't help it. I'm so

sorry. Oh, Ferdy—I couldn't but tell you—say you will!"

"I'll marry you fast enough," he answered, "if you make it worth my while. So you *are* Jan Hunkum's daughter, you clever hussy. You own to it now that the right time's come. I don't know much about law, but a daughter of any kind must come off best on such occasions. Perhaps you'll have half! And now, Liza, mum's the word: you've not been inside the house. And we'll set the police to catch that murderous bully! You run across to the Kippels yonder, and I make myself scarce. Good-bye."

"But, Ferdy——"

He came back to her. "If the money's there," he said, "and the old man's really dead, why shouldn't we go in and take some now?"

She eyed him narrowly. "I'm yearning to marry you, Ferdy," she answered. "I'd do anything for it. But I won't—no, I won't—steal."

"What a fuss you make," he said. "Well, it's easier to get it regular."

VI.

An hour later the Hemel was ringing with the news.

Against yesterday's disappointment stood out lurid the reality of to-day. Jan Hunkum was really murdered. He would not come back to say he was not. The constable from Horstwyk, forcing the door against which the bread-girl had vainly beaten, had found the miser prostrate among his treasures, killed by a blow from a bar which still lay by his side. It appeared that the lamp had been overturned in the struggle. Panic-stricken, probably, the murderer had fled, leaving most of the booty behind him. The money was there.

The money was there. Horrible details of the tragedy leaked out. The money was there. In each family circle the Hemelers softly computed impossible legacies, but the incidents of the crime were the public delight of the hour.

In the course of that Sunday afternoon Barend Everts was arrested at the house where he lodged. There was absolutely no evidence against him, no ground for suspicion, except that Jaap Avis had seen him creep home in the early morning, without a coat

on, and covered with dirt. But the police locked him up. Monday's newspapers all called him "the murderer," and the public conscience was appeased. Confronted with the examining magistrate, he refused to answer any questions. "I am a fool," he said. "Everyone knows I am a fool. Whatever I replied would be sure to do me harm." He remained obstinately silent. The authorities, accustomed to extorting confessions, were nonplussed.

While the slow investigation, with its futile interrogatories and blind quest of the missing jacket, dragged wearily nowhere, the body of Jan Hunkum was laid solemnly to rest, amid the hysteric lamentations of the Hemel. And immediately afterwards the contents of the will became known. Liza Brock was sole heiress. In her default the money would go to the cousins, proportionately, as the barber had told them—to the whole of the hamlet, in fact. The proviso about never having entered the cottage was written down also, and, whether expressly or through some inadvertence, it included Liza among the rest. Perhaps the recollection of this had tortured Hunkum's dying moments? No one will ever know. The conditions of the document must have been fresh in his mind. It had been drawn up a few hours before his death.

The whole hamlet sank away from Liza in one groan of admiration and scorn. She was an heiress indeed, and heiress of gold and of shame, said the Hemelers. From the miser's careful account-books it was proved that nearly one-half of his fortune had perished in the flames; some forty thousand guilders remained. The children, playing in the streets, stopped to call out, "Liza Hunkum!" their grinning elders casually reminded the girl how each successive speaker had "always stood her (solitary) friend." The morose pointed out that the money was still in the hands of the lawyers. "I wish it would remain there!" the heiress had foolishly exclaimed. A shower of opprobrious epithets fell behind her stiffening back.

As for Liza herself, she would gladly have hidden all day in her garret. She hated Jan Hunkum for the shame he had brought upon her. She despised, with a dogged affection, the mother who had sought, and now shared, her disgrace. The thought of the money was abhorrent to her: she scorned herself for desiring it still. The wretched jacket, that everyone was writing and talking about, she had buried near the pig-sty. Sometimes she hoped they would find it. But nobody dreamed of her as a possible accessory. She had knocked at the murdered man's door,

and, receiving no answer, had run to a neighbour's and given the alarm.

Fistycuffs was formally engaged to the heiress. They were to be married as soon as this business was settled. "Not a moment too soon," said the gossips. But that, in a place like the Hemel, was captiousness. It was envy and malice and much uncharitableness. For nobody, in the Hemel, married "too soon."

Fistycuffs showed himself frankly happy and good-natured. Everybody said he was not half a bad fellow. So they treated him—for he treated them—well.

"I shan't say a word about having seen Everts," he confided to Liza. "People might ask of us what we were doing there, don't you see? Best keep away from the police if you can. Besides, 'pon my honour, I wouldn't do any man a useless bad turn. Not even Everts. I'm not such a cad as to help the police."

The matter was indeed a point of honour with the speaker, perhaps the only point of honour he had. A point which would vanish as soon as convenient.

Liza had now one supreme preoccupation, and that was to get married "in time." But herein she unexpectedly found herself hindered by her mother. Mary Brock had wept stormy tears over her daughter's unspoken reproaches, over Jan Hunkum's horrible end,

over Barend's misfortune. She loudly proclaimed her belief in the latter's innocence. He was too good, she declared, for the likes of her daughter, just as he had been too good for herself. And she stood up, facing Fistycuffs and Liza.

"As long as it's not settled what happens to Barend," she said, "there'll be no marryings nor merry-makings *here!*" And she brought down her fist with a sympathetic crash on the tottery table in front of her.

"You be blowed!" said Fistycuffs, and pulled at his pipe. "Barend Everts is safe enough. The police haven't got any evidence. They'll have to let him go."

"Are you sure?" asked Liza, looking up quickly from a tiny something she was clumsily endeavouring to sew.

"Sure. They can't convict a man of murder for coming home without his coat. I don't understand about that business. If they had found the coat—as they should have done—at Jan Hunkum's—whew!" He ended in an expressive whistle. Liza bent over her needlework.

"But why don't he speak?" Fistycuffs resumed. "Where *is* the coat? That's what all the papers are asking, and he as mute as that table that Mary's gone and cracked."

"It ain't your table," retorted Mary fiercely. Nevertheless she looked with some interest for corroboration of the charge. "Barend's as innocent," she added, "as innocent as—me." She turned on her daughter. "What d'ye mean?" she cried, in a fury.

"I? Nothing," replied Liza with genuine amazement. "I said nothing."

"Ah, but you meant the more, you limb. Barend's as innocent of murder as an unborn baby. If he won't speak, it's because there's some woman in the business. He never was near Hunkum's cottage, you bet! He's shielding some woman."

The three looked at each other, uneasy, each with half a secret to hide.

"I know Barend," concluded Mary, shaking her head. "He's as much of a gentleman as the Baron."

"I don't believe it," said Liza.

"Believe what yer like. Yer don't believe in yer own mother. D'yer think 'cause he wouldn't have *you,* that he wouldn't have nobody?"

"Oh, shut up, the pair of you!" shouted Fistycuffs, kicking out his legs under the table. "He's done it, sure enough, and mighty cunning too! First he smashes the poor old fellow's head with the bar he brought in for the purpose, then he upsets the petroleum lamp, so people should think it was an acci-

dent. In course he hoped the whole cottage'd burn! And he made off with all he could grab in his hurry. I don't doubt we shall get back what he stole, but what he burnt's burnt, and I wish he was——"

"Yes, yes, we've heard all that before," interrupted Liza, nervously striking her foot on the floor.

"You hold your jaw and let me speak! Don't you see, Mary? All the papers are saying the same. 'Tis as clear as ditch-water. But none of it can be brought home to him, and they'll have to let him off."

"And he'll dance at your wedding," said Mary Brock.

"What? The man that murdered Liza's father? For shame on you! Besides, we shall be married long before they let him out."

"Not till he's out o' prison. You won't be married till he's out o' prison," said Mary Brock.

"What the devil do you mean?" said Fistycuffs, sitting up and curiously eyeing his prospective mother-in-law.

"What I say. I always do. You don't. Liza's under age, and I'm her mother. And I know what's respectable, though Liza thinks I doesn't. There'll be no feastings in *this* family, Ferdinand, till the murder business is over, say I!"

"Say it again, and I'll black your eyes for you!"

"Till this murder business is over——" Liza started to her feet.

"Go now, Ferdinand; it's late," she said.

"Very well," answered Fistycuffs sullenly. "But, mind yer, we marry next month or not at all!" he blustered out. The two women stood watching each other.

"Mother, he is right," said Liza softly. "We must marry next month."

Mary Brock sat down on the shaky table. "The law's on my side," she said, folding her arms.

"But unless they get more evidence, the case may drag on for months. Don't you want us, mother, to be married at all?"

"Ah, my lady, you're mighty soft-spoken to your disreputable mother—all of a sudden! You won't be married till this murder business is over! Fool, 'twill always be soon enough to find yourself chained to Fistycuffs!"

Liza Brock gazed at her mother's set jaws and hot eyes. Formalities are numerous in Holland: clandestine marriages impossible.

"You can't be married without I give you leave," cried Mary overbearingly. "You can't! You can't!"

"I know," replied Liza. Her voice was so gentle, Mary stared in astonishment.

"I'm your mother," continued Mary, nettled. "You can't help that."

Liza Brock stepped back. "No, I can't," she said. "Nor could you! Nor could you!"

She lashed the other woman's coarse soul with the laugh in her scornful tones, but the next moment her face was grown sad again. "Perhaps I care about things you don't care about. Mother, I want to be married—soon! I want to be!" There were tears in her rough voice. She threw forward her supple young body in the fervour of her appeal. "I want to be! I want to be!"

"Oh yes, you're a fine lady," said Mary, scratching her head. "And what's fine enough for your mother ain't half fine enough for you! *I* know. Your ideas of decency aren't mine, you say. They aren't. There was no need for hurry when I married—no need at all, and if I hadn't been left a poor lone widow, waiting for bread—but there, 'tis no use talking. There'll be no marrying here, and no giving in marriage, till this trial's over. I won't hear another word."

Liza quietly left the house, not even troubling to close the door. Mary called after her, hot words of abuse.

Although it was already past eleven, the girl walked straight to Joop Sloop's and knocked loudly.

"Walk in, mum," said Julia, with a mock curtsey, on the threshold. "The door didn't happen to be locked, mum. I didn't know in these parts as they ever was!"

"I didn't want to take you unawares," answered Liza. "Where's Fistycuffs?"

"Him!" said Julia, and dropped a rapid glance down her visitor. "Don't do unto others—I see! Mr. Fistycuffs, madam, is here."

"So I thought," replied Liza. Then she flushed with self-annoyance. "I mean," she added clumsily, "he said he'd look in here."

"Just so," remarked Julia.

"There's only two things I believe he really cares about. One's me and t'other's drink."

"Indeed?" replied Julia, smiling. "Now, I never give him drink, so he has to come to me for myself alone. You might try?"

Liza clenched her fists. "Where's Fistycuffs?" she said, as if till now they had been talking of someone else. "I want to speak to him, not to you. Tell him to come to me instantly. Outside."

"Undoubtedly outside," retorted Julia. She went and fetched the bully out of the inner room. "You

needn't hide," she said. "She knows you're here. Trust any woman to know. I knew when she was after Barend."

"That's a d——d lie," cried Fistycuffs. "Barend was after her, and you know it!"

"Swear at your wife, you brute!" replied Julia, thrusting him forward. "Do you think that I'd ever have looked at you, if it hadn't been to pay her out?"

"Don't, Julia. I'll be back in a minute. When I'm married, we needn't hide." He went out sullenly to Liza in the dark. "What do you want with me?" he said. Then he tried humour. "Haven't you had enough of me all this while? Didn't you tell me yourself to get out?"

"I meant you to go home," said Liza.

"So I shall when I've had my drink. I want it after talking myself hoarse over Barend. And, look here, I won't stand no nonsense——"

"Don't, Ferdy. Mother says she won't let us marry until the trial's over. I know mother. Nothing'll move her. Ferdy, we *can't* wait!" Her voice rang out in despair.

"Hold hard, can't ye? D'ye want Joop Sloop to hear? D'ye mean to say, Liza, that it's a really, truly, settled fact?"

"Yes."

"And Mary calls Barend a fool!" exclaimed Fisty-cuffs with huge contempt. "Why, a case like this—all suspicion and little evidence—drags on for months and months. All right. You go home and leave me to settle this little matter. I know how to manage it. You'll be married next month. Good-night." He turned, looked to right and left—all the yearning and hope of her heart swelled on high—and then he went back into the house.

"Why," he said to himself, "if we waited until she'd lost her chief reason for marrying me—hang it if I don't think she wouldn't have me at all!"

Next morning he solicited an interview of the examining magistrate and remained closeted with that important functionary for some considerable time.

VII.

FOR three months after the "murder" the newspapers consistently abused the police. They abused them for not having discovered anything, and also for not having communicated their discoveries to the Press. They abused them for not following up the clues vouchsafed by intelligent reporters, and still more for following them up when these clues came

to nothing. The public agreed with the newspapers, and so did the police themselves.

In the midst of this customary muddle—and of the month of February—an announcement was sent round by the authorities that the case had been sent up for trial. The Public Prosecutor was in possession of all the necessary evidence; the accused would undoubtedly be condemned.

Whereupon the newspapers, which had recently commenced pitying "the person still under arrest," immediately returned to attacks on "the murderer." And readers all over the country dropped their interest in this unravelled detective story, and, calmly awaiting the day of the trial, turned to the fourteen "mysteries" still on their list.

Not so at the Hemel, however, where the excitement flared up and burned brighter than ever. Speculation—the only flame whose increase needs no fuel —filled the air. But it illumined emptiness. One woman, in the silence of her garret, of her trudges on the highroad, kept asking: Had Barend confessed?

And for the hundredth time that woman turned upon herself. Why should Barend, the big, blue-eyed fool, who never needed money, why should Barend, of all the Hemelers, have sought to murder Hunkum? Only one explanation seemed possible: recollecting

their conversation on the night of the catastrophe, she made a close guess at the facts. "It was I that sent him," she whispered, in the loneliness of the garret, of the highroad. . "He knew about the paper. He knew I wanted money. He wanted the money for me." She would have been far more wroth with her father's murderer had she not often accused herself of the crime.

"Why, if he wanted the money, had he not taken it? The Hemel declared that he had. It felt confident that he had hidden underground the greater part of the miser's untold millions, cunningly leaving the "trifle" inherited by Liza. It was unanimous in declaring that the torture ought to be applied, to make him confess where the treasure lay hidden. And it also said that Liza had got more than she deserved, and that the Government ill-treated the prisoner.

Meanwhile, the accused was removed to the chief town of his province, where the High Court of Justice would try his case. The day before the proceedings began, the penniless Hemel diligently counted up its pennies. It found it had not money enough for a trip to the city, but it bravely resolved to go all the same. It never has money for anything, and only spends what it hasn't got on pleasure—for what else, it says truly, is money for? Loud envy ran riot around

"the heiress," whose expenses were paid as a witness. "Filthy lucre," said Joop Sloop, "always falls in heaps."

"Are *you* going, Ferdy?" asked Liza suddenly. For days she had delayed the question. It was now the night before the trial.

Fistycuffs grinned. "I wouldn't miss the winding-up," he answered; "no, not for anything."

"Then you can go with me," said Mary Brock, "Liza being a witness."

He objected, stammering clumsily. "I can't have anyone bothering. I'm going alone," he said.

"With Julia," remarked Liza imperturbably, turning her face to the mother. "Don't, mother; let him go."

"'Tis a lie!" shouted Fistycuffs; "a regular Liza-lie! You've got such an infernal temper, Liza, hang me if I don't think I'm a fool for wanting to marry you at all!"

"Oh, you'll marry me," sneered Liza sadly; "I shall always be worth your while."

He started up and came at her. Mary Brock flung an oath between them. "Don't, Ferdy," said the girl. "Don't worry me, then. I don't mind who you go with. I wish the whole horrible business was done." She shivered.

"Julia swears she ain't going at all," answered the

bully, somewhat mollified. "Dang me if I don't sometimes think she was sweet on that poacher chap."

"She?" cried Liza, her pent-up scorn ablaze. "She's sweet on them all, bad and good."

"Well, if she is, she don't show it," retorted Fistycuffs, nettled. Liza bit her lips.

Immediately after, in the painful silence that followed, there came a loud knock at the door—such a knock as means a command. The next moment two buttoned-up officials seemed to fill the room with their presence.

"Liza Brock?" said one of these men. "Which is Liza Brock? Look here, you must come with us. No harm's intended. Put on your hat and come."

She sprang from her stool. "Have they found it?" she cried.

"Found what?" The detective, to whom every human being was, of course, an undetected criminal, eyed her sharply.

"Nothing."

"You just come at once," said the detective, less kindly than before.

"Gentlemen," spoke Mary Brock, with obsequious resentment, "you needn't have given the poor girl such a turn, which is dangerous, considering the circumstances. And if either of you knows by experience as a father——"

"Ain't that girl ready yet? Look sharp," said the inspector.

"I s'pose 'tis this same business about her evidence——"

"Come along," said the inspector, and bundled out Liza into the night. The pair of policemen took her between them, and stumbled through the darkness till they emerged upon the highroad at some distance from the hamlet. Here a hired wagonette was in waiting. Liza recognised the bottle-nosed driver asleep on the step.

"Look sharp," said the inspector. That was his favourite phrase: he had risen in the force by repeating it. As the carriage rolled away, he flashed a dark lantern across his watch. "We shall just be in time," he said, "to catch the last train at Horstwyk Station."

So Liza knew she was being taken to the town. She resolved not to put any questions, pretending not to care.

Yet, in spite of all her assumed indifference, she could not keep her cheek from paling when, two hours later, she alighted under the dismal glare of a massive lantern over heavy gates. She knew that these dead walls enclosed a prison. It was here that Barend Everts sat awaiting his uncertain fate.

She shivered between locked doors in the chill of

the whitewashed entry. But then she forced herself to remember that Barend was her father's murderer. "What, in the name of mercy, gentlemen, do you want with me?" These words were at her lips, but she did not utter them aloud. For two long hours she had been refusing to pronounce them.

Her conductors led her, through whitewashed passages, to a whitewashed parlour. Everything was whitewashed — doubtless an object lesson from the people outside to the people within. Liza remembered having heard somewhere—not in a church, for she never went there—the expression "a whited sepulchre," words whose meaning she had never understood. She wondered now whether they could have referred to the prison. She was so unaccustomed to cleanliness, it seemed a hateful thing. She drew her shawl around her as if to avoid it.

"Barend Everts, the murderer, wants to see you," began the inspector, suddenly dropping that mystification which, with all criminal investigation people, passes for cleverness. "He's broke silence to-night, and says he wants to see you. The trial's to-morrow. He'll confess, he says, to you."

She sank down on one of the rush-bottomed chairs, and repeated to herself that she was calm.

Her tight-clutching fingers tore away the ragged fringe from the corners of her shawl.

A narrow door opened in the wall at the farther end. Two gentlemen entered, one old and one young. She noticed that the younger one carried a bundle of papers and wore a coloured cravat. Immediately after him came two warders, bringing the prisoner between them. In his prison dress the latter already looked two-thirds a convict. His heavy hands were superfluously manacled. His appearance was dejected and numb.

"Here, then, is the young person you were anxious to speak to," began the examining magistrate, as soon as he had seated himself at the table. After the noisy entry of cumbersome boots on the boarded floor an uncomfortable hush had fallen. Barend stood in the loud light, seemingly unconscious of his jailers.

But at the sound of his persecutor's voice he drew away his eyes from Liza's face.

"Go away, you all," he said in a low tone.

His gaze travelled stupidly round the half a dozen stolid men. One of the warders smiled.

"You forget to whom you are speaking!" exclaimed the magistrate, angrily rapping the table. "Whatever you may wish to say must be said in my presence. Surely you didn't expect a private interview with the principal witness?"

"Gentlemen," said the prisoner, "I want to speak to Liza."

The young clerk glanced up with a gleam of interest upon his good-natured face. He was a trifle too well dressed and too carefully groomed for the bareness and misery around.

"So you can — in my presence," repeated the magistrate testily. "Every word that you say will of course be taken down."

He played with his eyeglass. In all matters judicial he dreaded what he called "the personal note."

"Then I shan't confess a word," said Barend doggedly.

A long moment of silence ensued, so painful that Liza, irresistibly, coughed.

"I wanted to tell you, Liza, exactly how it happened," began Barend immediately. "I can't tell the Government; I'm too great a fool; they'd twist it all against me. I've thought it all out in prison. I've not been unhappy in prison. Government's better to poor people in prison than it is to poor people outside." He paused, as if ruminating this great truth. The clerk's pen scratched across the paper, "than it is to poor people outside."

"You needn't put in that bit," said the magistrate leaning over.

Barend suddenly veered round to the girl—so suddenly that the warders caught at him. He shook them off. "Listen well," he said, "remember it afterwards. I've thought it all out in prison. I've never been a good man, Liza. I've never pretended to be. I don't mean about the poaching. I can't fancy God Almighty thinks catching one hare in a hundred a very bad crime. Seems to me, before Government made the game laws, God Almighty had already given all the game away."

The young Nimrod at the table swept every vestige of sympathy from face and heart in one gigantic frown. "No, I don't mean the poaching, but all the same I'm not a good man. But it was all such a muddle at first, that I couldn't make out for the life of me if I'd done it or not. But I wondered if God Almighty would tell me—*He* must know, I suppose, although nobody else does—and one night I asked Him, and——" He turned on the hearkening group all round him: "Damn you all!" he burst out. "How can I tell her how God Almighty helped me, with all you standing by?" The magistrate, three fingers thrown up in alarm, made as if he would have repressed such language, but refrained. The criminal again turned away; his tone had so completely changed, it sounded almost jocular. "Look here, Liza," he

said, "it's all nonsense, you know. I never murdered Hunkum. They say they've got plenty of evidence. How *can* they have plenty of evidence of what I never did? They only say it to frighten me. When I found you——" The gentlemen at the table exchanged glances. Liza caught the movement and lifted a warning hand.

"There, you see!" cried the prisoner, his face instantly gone white. "They'd twist everything against me. I won't say another word. But mark you this, Liza, whatever they may prove or witness at the trial to-morrow, I never hurt your father. Remember that, won't you? That's all." He made a clumsy bow to the magistrate and slouched towards the door. Halfway he halted and came back.

"It can't be helped, then," he said in a stifled voice. "You must just make believe there's no one listening. I love you, Liza. I've always loved you. I've never loved—not *loved*—anybody else. It's worth being dragged here in this way—isn't it?—to hear any man say that. Good-night." He stood still. She went forward to him; twisting his hand round as best she could, in the manacles, she clasped it with steadfast face.

"Remove the prisoner," said the old magistrate mildly. He rose, and the young man with him. The

latter beckoned the inspector. "Find that girl some decent lodging for the night," he said. "Look after her." The police officer saluted, and, when the gentlemen were gone, tore a leaf from his pocket-book.

"There!" he said, hastily writing down an address, "you'll be all right there. It's my belief you're just an accomplice. Past midnight! I can't be bothered. Look sharp!"

VIII.

In the great court the great trial was on. In the great court, with its long-drawn hush, its stifled crowd, its continuous murmur at the farther end. The Hemelers, all personally interested, had pushed to the front, their uncleanness affording them a pass. Most of them now hung over the barrier triumphant, and nodded to the witnesses down below, in proof that they also were connected with the affair.

Liza, looking straight ahead, as she passed through the special entrance, had been astonished to see Fistycuffs already ensconced in the corner allotted to witnesses. He was laughing and nodding to someone in the gallery: Liza, following his gaze, caught Julia's insolent response. The next moment Fistycuffs sat

awkwardly studying his boots. He had no wish to offend the heiress before she became his wife.

"Ferdy a witness?" questioned Liza. Why had he not told her? And why had he never been present at any of the preliminary proceedings? Her heart misgave her. He had seen Barend leave the cottage. That was all, but it was a great deal; perhaps it would prove enough. He had always said the police must help themselves. Pals or police? No man of honour would help the police.

Oh, what did the whole wretched business matter to her? Again and again she had reiterated that question through the long night watch in her luxurious lodging-house bed. Again and again she had told herself—nothing. And the question had risen, unanswered, across the reply.

She would give her insignificant evidence. She had found the house unopened, that was all. That would inculpate nobody. *Now* Fistycuffs would add that he had seen Barend leave the cottage. Well, that was true; could she help it? Surely it would not be sufficient to convict anyone of murder. And if the Government thought that it was, the law must take its course. What could she, a wretched girl from the Hemel, understand about Government?

Whatever might have been her doubts or hesita-

tions before, since last night she knew Barend was innocent. He had told her. And, until she saw Fistycuffs mysteriously included among the witnesses, she had never seriously believed but that the prosecution would fail. Everyone had said it must fail for want of evidence. In legal investigation, as she knew, guilt or innocence does not seriously matter, but proof.

Barend, then, would be liberated, and she would marry Fistycuffs. She would have plenty of money to make Fistycuffs happy with, and her shame would be taken away. Never would child of hers rise up against her, as she rose against Mary Brock! Fistycuffs, if only he had money, was good-natured and kind. Everybody said so. She would be happy with Fistycuffs.

The Public Prosecutor was reading his Act of Accusation, as they call it. It seemed very lengthy and very strongly worded. To hear him, you would fancy the proofs were overwhelming. She strained to understand what he was saying, before he should be saying something else. A witness, he declared, would be forthcoming who could testify to the actual commission of the crime. A thrill of astonishment ran through the audience. She did not remark it: for her a handful of personages filled the vast building:

the prisoner, Fistycuffs, the judges—perhaps Julia—and herself.

The first witness of interest was Jaap Avis. The Hemel, bored by technicalities, expected a little diversion from him, but not much excitement from anyone. There *were* no witnesses: that was the misfortune.

Jaap Avis, intuitively prying, had seen Barend slink home at daybreak in sorry plight. It was Providence, said Jaap Avis, which had caused him, at the right moment, to draw back his window-blind.

For the first, and last, time during the proceedings the prisoner smiled. *He* knew that Providence was Jaap Avis' drunken neighbour's dirt-sodden "wife" —the widow with the black ringlets and pleading eyes, his own—the prisoner's—quondam landlady.

"You were up early," said the presiding judge to the witness.

"Yes, my lord judge," smirked Jaap Avis, "and the last to go home the night before."

"Drunk," said the prisoner's counsel.

But the presiding judge ruled this question irrelevant, unless counsel desired to argue that witness was still drunk in the morning. The advocate hastened to deprecate any such intention. His had merely been an involuntary annotation; without any

hint of inquiry in it. He did not doubt for a moment that six hours would suffice to render any Hemeler sober—as sober as a judge. The Hemelers grinned at each other, gratified, in perfect good faith, by the compliment. The lawyer was a teetotaler, inclined to grow rabid. All gin's sin: all sin's gin. That was his theory.

It was proved, then, that Barend had come home without his jacket. Not much more was proved. His counsel eagerly pointed out that the jacket had not been found in Hunkum's cottage, that its absence therefore disculpated his client: the man had been poaching——

"Yes, yes," said the President testily. "Quite true. If the prisoner would but say where the jacket was lost——" But the prisoner would say nothing, correctly surmising that, among lawyers, only the guilty may possibly find benefit in speech. The disconcerted judges declared his attitude indecent. The advocate, despairing, clenched both fists underneath his desk. The general conviction deepened that the prisoner was guilty, but would get off.

It was then that the Public Prosecutor called for Ferdinand. He stepped forward brightly, but he didn't look at Liza. A smile of prospective triumph lit the Prosecutor's yellow face. Liza clutched at the

rail in front of her. Supposing Fisty had found the jacket? Why had she gone so often, at midnight, to make sure it was still there? Why had she gone last night again? Supposing her lover betrayed the man who loved her? The tears stood in her eyes.

The next moment she steadied herself. After all, she couldn't help it. She must speak the truth. So, of course, must Fistycuffs. And the law must take its course.

"I followed the prisoner," Fistycuffs said smoothly. His clear accents filled the silent hall. "It was close upon twelve o'clock: I wondered where he was going. I thought he was after Jan Hunkum's chickens. Jan Hunkum had no chickens. I saw him go round the house to the little window at the back."

"Was it a moonlit night?" inquired the President.

"N—n—no," replied Fistycuffs, "it was not a moonlit night. I was quite close to him. And he wrenched away the iron bars from the window, and so he got in."

"Could you wrench away iron bars like that?" asked the President.

"Yes," said Fistycuffs. Barend Everts looked towards him, quietly. The Hemelers nudged each other, their wide mouths stretching from ear to ear.

"I crept round to the bedroom window," continued the witness. "There was a chink in the shutter and I looked through. Jan Hunkum was sitting in bed, with his money heaped up around him, heaps of money, all around him, heaps of banknotes and silver and gold."

"Not silver," interposed the Public Prosecutor softly.

"I fancied there was silver as well," replied Fistycuffs, half apologetic, half reproachful. "Poor men like me can't distinguish properly when they see a lot of treasure heaped up like that."

"And, besides, the chink was narrow," said the Prosecutor, turning to the judges.

"And, besides, the chink was extraordinary narrow. Barend Everts went straight up to the bed, with one of the window bars in his hand, and he struck Jan Hunkum down with it among the bedclothes, dead."

"How did you know he was dead?" asked the President.

"He looked dead, Mynheer the President. Barend Everts dragged down the body and threw it on the floor. Then he filled his pockets with gold and banknotes, stuffing them in anyhow as fast as he could. And then he upset the burning petroleum

lamp among the rest of the papers, and then he ran away."

Fistycuffs stopped speaking, and now looked across at Liza, magnificently: his task was accomplished, his success assured. A long thrill of delighted horror pervaded his audience, which had never doubted the immensity of Barend's secreted spoil. But some of the bolder spirits amongst the Hemelers stared curiously. They had often felt interested in Jan Hunkum's shutters. They had never found chinks.

"The pockets of his jacket?" inconsistently questioned the President.

"Which hide the treasure they are hidden with to this day," suggested the Prosecutor.

"I don't know," said the witness, for the President awaited an answer. He added: "The chink was extraordinary narrow."

"Mr. President," said the prisoner's advocate, "that chink seems to have expanded and contracted at will." The President frowned. He was delighted with this unexpected resistance. Of course, as they all knew, the prisoner was guilty. They would be able to prove him so now.

But the President was a moral man. He liked to point a moral, just as Fistycuffs liked to adorn a tale.

"Did it not occur to you, witness," he began, "when you saw the prisoner enter the house, that you might, by immediately following him, avert an impending catastrophe?"

"Do what, your worship?" asked Fistycuffs, to gain time.

"Might prevent the old man's being killed!" explained the President angrily.

Fistycuffs opened his eyes. He wanted to marry Liza without more delay. He was not in the world to avert catastrophes.

"No," he said, "it didn't occur to me. I didn't know there was going to be murder. And, besides, is your worship aware that, if I had entered Jan Hunkum's house, I should never have been able to inherit a penny of Jan Hunkum's gold?"

"You are almost an accomplice," said the President, very red in the face. "The moral standard of the lower classes in this country is deplorable. It is incomprehensible, when all the non-Christian virtues are daily taught in the undenominational schools. This man's evidence is of the greatest importance. You can step down."

The Public Prosecutor popped up. "We have now to hear the statement," he said, "of the girl who warned the constables, whereupon these latter found

the victim lying exactly as the last witness has described. That, with some minor, technical, evidence, will complete the case."

"Speak up," said the President to Liza, before she had spoken a word.

She turned when she stood in open court, desirous only not to see Fistycuffs.

"Look this way," said the President. An usher pushed her. She gazed up at the lofty tribunal, the robed judges, the big inkstands, the majesty of the law.

"Please, I must stand like this," she said in tones thick like a swollen torrent. "It's all lies what the last witness has been saying. It's lies, my lords, lies! I can prove it. Let me speak, like this! Leave me alone, you man! I can prove it. It is lies, lies, lies!" No one had stopped her. They fell back in amazement. The Hemelers, who considered the heiress their own especial, important property, had concentrated much of their attention upon her from the first. The whole crowded concourse, however, now suddenly realising that this was the heroine of the tragical story, the murdered man's daughter, the last witness's sweetheart, the ragged inheritress of fabulous wealth—the whole concourse rose, struggling, to stare at her, to see her, enjoy and understand her, to get

an impression, a sensation, something engrossing that you can carry away. There was a flutter, and the continuous "Hush, hush!" of increasing excitement. Her rapid words came tumbling, as waves before the wind.

"It is lies," she repeated. "I can prove it. He cannot have been near Jan Hunkum's cottage. He cannot have seen what he says he saw. It isn't true, and if it had been true he couldn't have seen it."

"Why not, pray?" asked the judge.

"Because it's lies. All lies." The Prosecutor smiled again. "You will have to prove what you say. You are engaged to the last witness, are you not?"

"Yes."

"You give your lover a very bad character. What is your reason for affirming that he has not spoken the truth?"

"I would rather not say. But it's all lies."

Despite the general tension a ripple of laughter passed over the public. The professionals steadied their faces to a sneer.

"You will *have* to say. To say everything. To prove, instantly, your charge."

"I can prove it."

"How?" the President barked.

"Because he was with me." She spoke the words quite softly: everybody heard them at the back of the gallery.

There was a silence. Presently the Public Prosecutor said—"We know he was. That is to say, he had been. It was coming away from the witness which made him so late. They had enjoyed each other's company till very near midnight, Mynheer the President. That is no business of mine."

"The morals of the rural population!" said the President, and he threw up both hands. By the way, he owned a wife for each.

"I can't help it, Ferdy!" exclaimed Liza desperately, still staring away over the heads of the judges. "I *must* tell them! You know you were in the pig-sty! You know I had locked you up in the pig-sty! Your worships, I had locked him up in the pig-sty, because — because I wanted to! He stayed there all night, your worships. He couldn't have seen anything happen anywhere, my lords!"

"You seem to do most things because you want to," said the President. "Are you in a hurry to be married because you want to, or because you must?" He leered at her: the Public Prosecutor bit his nails.

"Because I must," she answered fearlessly. She threw back her head, facing them all, in her rage.

"Did it not occur to you, witness," he began, "when you saw the prisoner enter the house, that you might, by immediately following him, avert an impending catastrophe?"

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IX.

In the darkened garret—it was dark enough, at best—she lay stretched on her bed. The surroundings were far from beautiful, but there was a white look on her dusky face which somehow partly beautified them. She opened her eyes.

"I want to see the child," she said wearily.

"The child's dead," replied Mary, in a loud voice. Presently she sniffed, but rather in defiance of some unknown fate than in sorrow.

Liza closed her eyes again, and the lashes slowly moistened. It was some time before she said—"All right."

Again there was a long pause. Then Mary remarked—"You can see it all the same," and she got up and brought the little bundle across.

"I should be glad it was dead," said Liza, gazing steadily, "if I was dead too, and—and Ferdinand. I wish Ferdinand was dead too, and me."

"What!" exclaimed Mary. "You don't mean to say you still care for that scoundrel Fistycuffs? You haven't mentioned his name, Liza, since you left off being delirious. Not that you've said much since

then. But to care for a scoundrel like Fistycuffs! I'm glad the babe's dead, for it might have been like him."

"Hush, mother! Yes, you're right," murmured Liza. "Yes, it's best about the baby. I—I don't want, I'm sure, to speak about Ferdinand. I don't want never to mention his name again. He's dead to me. But I wish we was both under the black earth, mother, and nobody to speak of the shame."

"Ferdinand's in prison," retorted Mary.

It was what Liza had dreaded throughout the gloomy days, yet the fact came home to her with a shock. She burst into a crying fit.

"Don't be a fool!" objected Mary. "Where else should he be, if you please, with judges in the land? They ought to hang him. The scoundrel!"

"Don't, mother," sobbed the girl. "I don't care about Ferdinand. I don't never want to hear his name again. But I don't want you, neither, to speak like that. If he's in prison, it's my doing. Will they —will they punish him bad?"

"Indeed they will," replied Mary, with conviction. "It's swearing lies, and that's a crime against the Queen. Not like swearing ordinary, or telling common lies, which ain't crimes at all, Joop says. They'll make it penal servitude. And serve him right."

"The lamp smells so," said Liza wearily. "I do wish it wouldn't smell. It makes my head so bad."

"Well, you've grown mighty finical to mind the smell of a lamp," replied her mother. "You'll be better soon now, Liza: Aunt Judith says so, and she came and 'read the words' over you again last night. She's been wonderful good about 'exercising' you. And when you're a wee bit stronger, you won't mind no smells of lamps."

"But I wish you'd open the window now," said Liza. Her mother obeyed, grumbling. As the sash went up—it was a sort of skylight—there came through the mirky air, faintly across the distance, a sound of uproarious singing, of drunken revelry.

"*That's* your doing," said Mary moodily. "Not Fistycuff's being in prison, which is his very own. But *that's* your doing, more fool you!"

"What's my doing?" asked Liza, turning her head on the pillow.

"Why, all that noise there! The singing and goings on at Joop's, and half a dozen other places! It's been so night after night, ever since they come back from the trial, and that is a week ago to-day. They're spending the money that's going to come to 'em—thanks to you, that squandered your rightful property amongst a lot of ne'er-do-wells. Not a

house in the Hemel, they do say, excepting ours, but gets its hundreds or thousands, Liza—Brock!"

"You'll get your share," murmured Liza. "Please mother, I couldn't help it. I wish you'd let me go to sleep."

With a grunt Mary retreated to the lamp. She sat down helplessly, a bit of towelling between her dirty fingers. It was just a week to-day since Liza, on the night of her return from the trial, had given untimely birth to a puling babe. The babe had stopped puling yesterday. The bit of towelling lay on Mary's lap, the needle sticking in its third uneven hem.

To-day, according to Dutch legal usage, the verdict had been pronounced in the city, and, doubtless, Barend had been released. Everyone said he must be released—for want of evidence. As for the unsolved mystery, the triangular psychological puzzle, those now interested professionals only. Fistycuffs, hopelessly ruined, had confessed, with abundance of tears. People wanted Barend to get off. The Hemelers, prospectively wealthy, were not inclined to be hard on the author of their good fortune.

Mary Brock had fallen crushed beneath the crash of all her splendid aspirations. At first she could only sit and moan. Then, at last, she got up—be-

cause she had to—and nursed both child and grandchild, in very clumsy manner, nursed them and cursed them and cried over them alternately—or even simultaneously, when her feelings got too much for her under the deep depression of Liza Hunkum's—Hunkum's, mind you!—self-defeat.

She sighed again. She felt she was a wicked woman: the music maddened her. She rejoiced at any relief. The door creaked open and Barend Everts stood before her.

He seemed to fill the attic. She thought he looked all the better for his long seclusion. There had been some strange rumour, lately, of money having come to him. But that was doubtless false.

He came right into the middle of the room, stopped a moment to gaze down on the dead baby, looked across to Mary, seemed about to say something, and then checking himself, in the hush, turned to the dark corner, to the bed.

He kneeled beside it. "Liza," he said, "I want to speak to you. I want to say something. May I?"

She opened her eyes and looked at him.

"I'm going to America," he hurried on. "I've got some money, Liza. 'Tis the final payment on my mother's legacy—her aunt's, you remember—it's come whilst I was in prison—five thousand guilders

—a trifle over. I'm going to America to try and farm. I want you to come with me, Liza."

"How could I?" she said softly. "I don't deserve to, Barend. Oh, Barend, you mustn't take me. Oh, no, no, no."

"Liza, have you got my jacket? Did you hide it? Have you got it still?"

She nodded.

"Liza, won't you marry me?"

"No, no, no," she said almost inaudibly, unwillingly, ever fainter.

He bent so close, he kissed her before and between the words.

THE FAIR-LOVER.

THE FAIR-LOVER.

I.

ANNEKE PETERS stood before the cottage door. She had finished the drudgery of the day for the day. To-morrow morning she would begin the whole thing over again, as she had begun it yesterday, patiently. Anneke Peters was a good girl. She knew it. That was the one bright spot in her life of monotonous doing-your-best.

For seven years, ever since her father died, she had lived with her widowed uncle, old Pete Peters; Pete the miser, as the village called him, "Mammie's Grave Pete." Her own mother she could not remember: her father, she remembered, drank. She was fourteen when she came to keep house for Uncle Pete; she had never done anything else, excepting, before that, keep house for her father. The latter had frequently abused, and occasionally fondled her: Uncle Pete had never done either, but he grumbled from morning till night. He was a respectable man

in his way: born amongst a pauper set, he had worked himself up a few steps in the world, as a pedlar, by sheer industry and lies. He had a talent for commercial mendacity, the lie that pays; he was the cleverest liar for miles around. He would swear himself black in the face, while describing his goods, "by the grave of his sister;" his excuse to himself, and to God, being this, that he never had had any sister to swear by. But when he substituted "mother's" for "sister's" he could always be relied on. Those who had frequent doings with him found him out, and that is how he got his nickname. In middle life he had married, and soon after lost, a childless widow with a competency. He then gave up his little business, and henceforward did nothing, living poorly, and lying for diversion, as he had formerly lied for gain. His other amusement was grumbling. He grumbled at everything and everybody, the Government, the weather, and Anneke, from morning till night. And he told stories all over the village, inventing complications, embroiling neighbours, keeping up a sort of perpetual April fooling and finding it excellent sport.

Anneke worked from morning till night to make all things go so well there should be no cause for grumbling, but that undertaking is hopeless where

the grumbler needs no cause. She was very ignorant, she could barely read and write, but she had a natural liking for refinement of the outer kind—for pretty things and pleasantness; she put a couple of geraniums upon the window-sill, though "Mammie's Grave Pete" complained they kept you from seeing the girls go by.

"Boys go by," he corrected himself, with a leer. "They don't stop to look in, Anneke—much less, cross the threshold." He had few jokes, but frequent. "There's none come to fetch you for the Kermesse," he said. He said it over and over again.

He had grumbled over it on this summer evening, complaining that no man would ever come to take her off his hands. Here was Truda engaged to the handsomest ne'er-do-well that had ever left black children behind him in India, and nobody to give Anneke as much as a look, unless it be the blind beggar, Jan Siemen.

Anneke had not replied that she saved her uncle a servant, nor had she pointed out that Jan Siemen never came near their uncharitable door. She had simply gone and stood outside in the early summer twilight, and thought how beautifully clear and still the sky was in the soft blue evening shades.

Yes, Truda was engaged. To handsome Harmen

Reys, the Indian corporal. Truda, the child of Aunt Peters' prosperous sister, the wealthy innkeeper's only daughter, whose father jingled his keys and talked of his "iron safe;" Truda, who wore clothes to church on Sunday such as no other girl could have got at honestly. Truda Batsy had always scorned her low-born uncle's lower niece. She had been taught to do so, and had gladly learnt the lesson. "We must be decent to 'Mammie's Grave,'" said Juffrouw Batsy. "It'll be all the better when he steps into his own."

"Then I wish to God he would," said the innkeeper.

"But, as for Anneke Peters, she's of no account at all," said Juffrouw Batsy. She had slapped Truda as a child for asking if Anneke was a cousin of theirs.

And now Truda was engaged, and more aggressively scornful than ever. For years, from the days of their meeting at the infant school, the bigger girl, two years younger, but florid and healthy, had pinched, bullied, insulted the weakling creature with the plaintive eyes. Many and many a time she had gibed at her in the streets. Now she was triumphant, and, indeed, why should it not be so? She had always triumphed from the first. All success and comfort and delight had always been hers. She even drove in her father's chaise on week-days.

As for being engaged—that is, formally engaged

to be *married*—such grandeur unachievable formed no part of Anneke Peters' wildest dreams. But certainly she would have felt pleased had she received those more casual attentions which fall to the lot of most country girls. Nobody ever offered to keep company with Anneke; nobody suggested a walk, or stopped for a chat by her window. She was plain; she was poor; she was modest; people did not even feel absolutely sure that her father and mother had "been to the mayor's." Luckily for her, the chief proof on her behalf was furnished by Pete's persistent denial of the fact.

Yes, she would have liked a sweetheart—especially a Kermesse sweetheart—once in a way; a young man who would have taken her, as all the other girls got taken, sooner or later, to the annual fair at Overstad. That fair was the event of the year to all the peasants for miles around. The fair at Overstad, the splendid, riotous, ruinous fair; everybody went there in couples; it was a monstrosity to remain away. She only wanted to go one year. She only wanted to see, to have seen, to be able to talk about the thing with the others, who talked of it all through the year. Her uncle, unwilling to accompany her, had always refused to let her go unattended. "If you want to see it," he said, "get a lover—like the other girls. Ha!"

As she stood before the cottage door, this summer evening, Turda Batsy came by on her way to her own home, the tavern two hundred yards off. Harmen Reys was with her, looking bored. Perhaps the two had been quarrelling? Anneke's good little human heart gave a little leap of pleasure, instantly checked.

"Well?" said Truda, stopping short. She was vexed with her ne'er-do-well lover, and her heart was full of spite. "Anneke, are you going to the fair this year? They say it's quite unusually fine."

"Perhaps," replied Anneke boldly.

"Really? And whom are you going with?"

"Wouldn't you just like to know?"

"I shouldn't. I don't care tuppence who goes with whom, as long as I go with Harmen. But you'll want a sweetheart, Anneke, unless you take your Uncle Pete."

"Good-night, Truda," said Anneke, turning away.

"Or you might take Beggar Siemen. Anneke, if I were you, I'd rather *hire* a sweetheart than never go at all!" She passed on with a laugh, her lover trailing in her wake. Anneke stood looking after her.

"What a brute you are!" said Harmen, and twirled his light moustache.

Truda Batsy laughed again. "Why shouldn't she go with a hired lover?" said Truda. "Better people 'n

she have done it a hundred times. But Uncle Pete'd never give her the money: that's why."

"You're a brute," replied Harmen, still more sulkily. "I'd almost be better to go with a meek little brown-eyed thing like that than with such a vixen as you."

"Smooth words, please," said the girl, angrily. "Why don't you go with her yourself, then? Don't overcharge, she ain't got much. None but the lowest of the low let themselves out at the fair."

"You're a brute," he said again. He was a man of few ideas.

She turned round suddenly and struck him a sounding slap on the cheek.

The quondam corporal straightened himself; a pink flush spread round the red mark on his fair skin. "I never strike a woman," he said, and, saluting, left her.

Anneke had gone back into the house. She walked slowly, meditating. She did not hate the innkeeper's daughter, for she could not honestly have wished her ill, but if there was anyone on earth she loathed and dreaded, that person was Truda Batsy.

"Truda, eh?—with her lover?" said old Pete. "I thought so, but I couldn't make sure because of

your damned geraniums." She went to mix her uncle his evening glass of brandy and water—cold from June to September, hot from September to June: she had done that nightly now for half a dozen years. He always grumbled over the mixture, yet once, on the single occasion when she had spent a few days in bed, he had told her, grumbling, that no one could prepare it as well as she.

"What a good-looking man he is," pursued old Pete. "No wonder that, out in the Indies, he could bring down sweethearts like cocoa-nuts!"

"Was he very bad?" asked Anneke, with an innocent thrill.

"Bad? What a fool-girl's question! Is it bad when you potter about your stupid bit of a garden, if you smell at the stocks and wallflowers and things? What are they for else? Though, depend upon it, *he* didn't smell at wallflowers. You're a wallflower, Anneke."

She made no reply, but helped him to bed. He was an unpleasant old man, and this part of her daily task was especially distasteful to her. She went up to her own little white attic—every year she did the whitewashing herself—and lingeringly undressed. "What folly!" she said at last, endeavouring to cast off the thought which returned in the night and next

morning. After all, the folly was possible. Other girls had committed it.

In the afternoon, when she ran out with a big tub of washing-water to the reedy canal that creeps along by the village, she saw Truda sitting idle, with a couple of others, under the big chestnut in front of the inn. They were laughing heartily. The "Ho! ho! ho!" of Truda's booby cousin Tony rose above the cackle of the girls. Harmen was there again also. "Do you forgive me?" Truda had asked that morning, a little shamefacedly, for her. "No," he had answered, "let's talk of something else."

"Anneke!" called Truda across the blazing sunlight.

Anneke turned paler than usual. "It is the sign!" she thought. For, in her foolishness, she had told herself that never would she venture to question Truda about girls who had hired their squires, but if Truda began, well, then——

She came away from the waterside, with her tub held out before her, hot from her work, through the lazy heat, to the shadow of the chestnut-tree. The others were cool and merry; a great basket of cherries stood in the middle of the group.

"Well, have you got him already?" questioned

Truda. "I was telling Corry and Suzy you were going to pay for a sweetheart."

"Will she advertise for one?" said Corry, who had from childhood been Truda's principal friend, and who now was being courted by the red-faced farmer lad, Tony.

"Nonsense," said Truda. "All she need do is to go to old Nell Trops in the Weavers Street at Overstad. That's where the girls apply who can't get a lover for themselves." The big innkeeper's daughter folded her fat pink arms, and looked triumphantly from Anneke to Harmen. "You go to Nell Trops in the Weavers Street," she said.

"It isn't true! You're chaffing me!" said Anneke; but some of them saw the flash in her eyes as Truda gave the address.

"It's true enough," remarked lumbering Tony Dunder. "We had a cow-girl at our place two years ago that got one cost her a florin. A florin he took, and everything free—the shows, and merry-go-rounds, and the waffles."

"And he treated her decent?" questioned Anneke, eagerly. "He—he just kept her company, and let her go home when she liked?"

"Oh, I daresay he treated her just as she wanted him to," replied Tony, laughing clumsily. Corry

laughed also. Suzy sat silently eating cherries, and shying the stones into Anneke's tub.

"I don't believe a word of it!" cried Anneke. "It's all chaff and rubbish!" The girls jeered back at her.

Harmen Reys bent forward, and, taking a big handful of cherries, threw them into the washing-tub. "Have some?" he said. "They're very good."

Anneke's heart was too full for any sort of answer. She crept back to her house and her work.

"Do you know, she intends to do it," announced Truda, and pursed up her lips.

"Nonsense!" cried the other girls.

"I tell you she does. And, look here, we must have a lark. Of course, she will do it on Farmers' Thursday, when all the countryside is there. Harmen, you must go to Mother Trops, and get her to give you to Anneke."

"What!" cried Harmen Reys. "No, thank you; I'm going with you."

"So you shall, you dunderhead! But, first, you must fetch the fair Anneke. You will take her to the circus, and seat yourselves on one side; then we shall come in afterwards—a lot of us—the whole village—and seat ourselves opposite; then, presently, you'll think of some pretext to escape and come over

to the empty seat beside me, and Anneke, who's paid for her lover——"

"Ho! ho! ho!" burst in Tony. The others all shook and cried out with laughing.

"What fun it'll be!" screamed Truda.

"*I* think it's rather low," said Harmen.

"Don't be a fool," remonstrated Tony.

"No," retorted Harmen, "I won't so long as I couldn't, anyhow, be as big a fool as you."

"Hush! hush!" interposed Truda. "Let's think the plot out. We must arrange about it all in a day or two."

"It'll keep till to-morrow," said Harmen, rising and stretching his long limbs. "The cherries are all eaten. I'm going home. I've got something to do." A loud laugh went up from them all, for it was well known that Harmen lived and loafed on his Indian corporal's pension.

"I'm coming with you," ejaculated Tony, stumbling to his feet.

"Something to do means gin," said Truda, scornfully. "Why don't you go in and drink father's?"

"Because it comes too expensive," retorted Harmen.

"But if I give it you it costs you nothing."

"It couldn't be dearer than when you give it me," said Harmen with a smirking sneer.

He slung off with a jerk of annoyance. She jarred on him, especially of late. He wasn't a good man; he didn't mind a bad woman, but the worst man wants a woman to be tender.

"Truda isn't the sort of girl *I* should care to marry," said Tony, slouching along beside the other's army step.

"Nor is Corry," replied Harmen sharply.

The bumpkin grinned, a sudden break of white along his crimson face. "Who talks of marrying Corry?" he replied. "Marrying's one thing, and courting's another. Kermesse comes once in a year, and marriage comes once in a lifetime."

"Yes," said Harmen meditatively, his pale eyes dreamy with reminiscence of a sunny country where the wedding knot is more easily untied.

"And she hasn't got the money either that people say she has."

"What?" cried the other, suddenly attentive, all the dreaminess gone from his gaze.

"No, she hasn't," said Tony with malicious alacrity, "if everybody knew what *we* know! But then, luckily, they don't."

"Tony, let's go and have a drink."

"I'm agreeable, if you pay. You just take the train to Overstad and ask the registrar of mortgages

there on whose property he registered a mortgage last Thursday. 'No, thank you, not I,' says father when Uncle Batsy come to him. 'I don't go lending o' my money to chaps as speculate in corn!' "

"Phew!" said the corporal between his teeth.

"But there's old Pete Peters, Tony: all his dead wife's money'll be Truda's some day."

"If he leaves it her. But he always says he is going to leave it to Anneke."

"That don't prove anything, coming from such a born liar. I wonder if he's really free to leave it as he chooses?"

"Let's take him for a drink, and make him tell us on his mother's bones? We shall find him under the beeches by the church."

They marched off in that direction.

"What's Truda done to you?" asked Harmen presently.

"Done to me? Nothing. What should she have done to me? We'll see whether she can always get as many Kermesse sweethearts as she chooses! A lubber may only be a lubber, but he's better than nothing at all."

"I see," said Harmen, scornfully. "That was last year, I suppose."

They found old Pete filling his pipe with newly

purchased tobacco. "She's a very good girl," said Pete; his little eyes twinkled, disappeared.

"I shall leave her every penny I have," he said presently, comfortably ensconced in his favourite corner, in his favourite public-house. "I shall. By my sister's grave, I shall." He saw suitors on the horizon. He wanted to have suitors, that he might enjoy dismissing them. The young men gave him a couple more glasses of gin.

"I shall leave her every penny, every penny," he said, nodding over his glass. "Yes, I swear it, every penny. By my mother's grave, I shall."

"Oh, hang your idiotic mother's grave," said Harmen, getting up to go.

Meanwhile Anneke, standing over the washtub, slowly thought the matter out. She felt she could no longer bear the public ignominy, not so much of never having possessed an accredited sweetheart, as of never having found a swain to take her to the fair. She knew that many a maid in her position would have started boldly for the Kermesse, and waited there until some honest fellow invited her to spend the evening with him, as in more exalted circles men came up to claim a waltz. But when she thought of such indelicacy her heart bumped. To hire a cavalier,

to pay honourably for honourable companionship, that seemed a very different matter. "Nell Trops in the Weavers Street," she repeated to herself. "Overstad is such a big city, nobody will ever find out." She flattered herself that she had admirably kept her own counsel before her tormentors. It would be best to go on "Farmers' Thursday," when all the villagers, for miles around, trooped in to make high holiday. On that day, following his invariable custom, Uncle Pete would go across to Rotterdam to fetch his quarter's income, getting back at midnight with the money, sober as a judge. That was *his* Kermesse treat, he always used to say.

Yes, she would go, and, taking two tickets for the circus, would sit revealed to all beholders—especially to the young folks of her own village, most especially to Truda—revealed as a girl who can keep Kermesse, if she chooses, and keep it with better men than those she left at home. Her heart glowed as she pictured the hour of triumph to herself. For the twentieth time she counted the few florins in her purse. She believed she had enough.

II.

Two days later, on the morning of the momentous Thursday, Anneke, up betimes from a sleepless couch, hurried through her work as if she had not the whole long day before her. Presently she laid out her uncle's rusty Sunday clothes: she dropped from her trembling hands the fuzzy black hat she was brushing.

"Stupid!" growled Pete; he rarely said anything more, but, then, he was always saying this. There were times when she almost regretted her father's volleys of oaths.

"I shan't be back till midnight," said Uncle Pete. She knew that. These quarterly trips to the bank were the supreme satisfaction of the old man's life. She watched him depart, a tottery old scarecrow with an abnormal umbrella, along the poplar-bordered road.

In the afternoon, having nothing left to do, she sat down to sew at some of the numerous clothes in which her soul delighted. It seemed astonishing, to her accustomed activity, how slow the hot hours passed. She dressed carefully, in her dark green gown, and fastened her mother's great gold ear-pins into the snowy, tightly fitting cap. Then, at seven

o'clock, in the full glory of the solemn July evening, she crept forth, locked the cottage door behind her, and hastened away.

The station was a mile off, along open road. But Anneke, trembling like a guilty thing lest the village cronies should observe her, made a circuit of two miles under cover of brushwood, along ditches and fields. The platform, when she reached it, was deserted. All the others had gone in the morning, making a day of it. She had watched them passing the window in excitable groups.

At Overstad Station there was plenty of commotion. The roar of the Kermesse seemed to rush out and welcome the trains. Over the whole city hung an atmosphere of burning grease; in the distance, about the vast Cattle Market, rose a yellow flare of dirty light against the tranquil sunset and the solitary evening star.

Anneke, avoiding that quarter, crept round to the Weavers Street, and studied the names inscribed on the doors, according to a custom very general in Holland.

The street was a side one, short, uncanny in its stillness. Before one of the tall houses a little child was playing on the doorstep. Anneke hoped it would go in.

"Well, my dear, and what are you doing here? Surely you ought to be at the Kermesse," said a pleasant voice behind her. She turned in alarm. The speaker was a tall man, with a somewhat gruff appearance, and a beard that looked as if it would better have fitted somebody else's face.

"Well," he continued, as she did not answer, "what do you say to going there with me?"

The idea of thus accompanying an unknown, unrecommended person struck horror into her breast. "Oh, no, no," she said anxiously. "Please go away. I have come here to see a friend." He fell back, laughing.

"Perhaps your friend lives *there!*" he cried, pointing to a little house that hung twisted into a corner, half hidden between two tall neighbours—a little house, with a slouching doorway and a window that winked. She watched him turn the corner; she waited until he must be definitely gone. For a moment she desired to return to the station; she was miserable, she was alarmed; she took a few steps towards the road. Then a sort of bravado came over her—the dogged resolve to go through with it. She walked straight up to the little house and boldly rang the bell. An old woman opened the door.

"Do you know where Nell Trops lives?" asked Anneke, faintly.

"Nell Trops lives here, my pretty," said the old woman. "Come in."

Anneke followed the creature into a back room. Of procuresses, evil houses, dangers to the innocent, she knew nothing. The vices she had heard of were the vices of the fields.

"And what do you want of Nell Trops, my dear?" The old woman cast a sidelong glance all over the shrinking figure; her expression grew indifferent. Nothing worth much.

"I—I—I," stammered Anneke, her pale face a dusky red; "I had heard—I thought that here——"

"Then you had heard wrong," said the old woman sharply. She held the door open. There was a musty smell in the little dingy room.

"But there was a girl from our village got one," cried Anneke, emboldened by necessity.

"I daresay," replied Nell Trops, drily. Then, suddenly, a light seemed to break in upon her. "You want a sweetheart to go a-fairing with?" she said, with a cunning glance.

Anneke hung her head.

"Is that all?" went on the woman briskly. "Quite right, my dear, quite right. Yes, this is the correct

address. Now, what sort would you like to have, my dear—town or country? Do you like 'em fair or dark?—and what are you going to pay for him?"

"Oh, don't!" said Anneke.

"*My* charge," said the old woman with precision, "is fifty cents. With an umbrella, seventy-five."

Anneke lifted her glance. "Why with an umbrella?" she asked in sudden curiosity.

"It has always been so," replied Nell Trops, snappishly. "In my mother's time, and her mother's before her. An umbrella looks respectable; it means a better class. Everyone knows that; it's a recognised fact, like the cathedral. Nothing's changed but the prices—they're lowered. Times are bad in everything. And the girls have got so bold, they find sweethearts for themselves!"

"Please, I'll take an umbrella," said Anneke. Nell Trops went out, and locked the door behind her—from habit. The girl started up with a shriek. That dim consciousness of the world's evil which is the torment and the safeguard of every innocent creature fluttered her whole heart with an agony of fear. "Let me out!" she cried, "let me out!"

Instantly the old hag stood before her. "You fool," said Nell Trops, with vast scorn, "how pretty do you think you are, pray?" The words, dimly

understood, struck the girl's heart like a foul missile, leaving an indelible stain.

"Would you like a sweetheart with a nice black beard?" continued Nell more gently, for her visitor's expression alarmed her. "Beards are extra respectable. You'd have to pay a quarter more for a beard."

"No, not a beard," replied Anneke, suddenly reminiscent of the stranger in the street.

"Well, I haven't got 'em in boxes like tin soldiers," said the woman, put out. "You should have let me know this morning, and you could have had half a dozen to choose amongst. Beards are *my* taste. A big beard and a bald head for me."

"Yes, yes, a bald head!" exclaimed Anneke, who now only wanted not to have the stranger.

Again the old woman went out, this time without closing the door. She returned immediately, ushering in the man from the street.

"Not—not this gentleman," was what Anneke tried to say. But she dared not. And, whilst the words still struggled in her throat—"There now, my dears," said Nell Trops, "you just go a-fairing together! A pretty couple you make," said Nell Trops. She almost pushed Anneke into the passage. "The florin, my dear, if you please. Yes, that's right. Come and tell me to-morrow how much you've enjoyed your-

self!" The door closed behind Anneke. The room had been dark; the street did not seem much lighter.

"Now, let's hurry up and enjoy ourselves," said the stranger gruffly. "You'll find me a good sort. Good as gold, honour bright!"

Somewhat reassured, she walked on beside him in silence, towards the increasing tumult of the Market. As yet this excursion was not very enjoyable: she had pictured it altogether different. In fact, she was miserable.

But the Cattle Market—the central glory of the Kermesse—that certainly was a sight to be seen. Far away it shone into the deep blue silence, a yellow lake of many thousand oil lamps, with—high in air, obtrusive—the white electric glare. The uninterrupted bellow of sound—bands, singing, yells, cat-cries, calls of salesmen and showmen, pistol-shots, merry-go-rounds, organs—formed the music of a Pandemonium. Between the long alleys of flaring booths and stalls of every sort rocked a crowd of red-faced peasants, many of them jumping, hustling, shouting—all excited, and a large percentage drunk. Uniforms were everywhere in quantities, especially about the pipe-hung shooting galleries: men and women massed together—sombre clothes and muslin caps and golden ornaments—whirled, insensate, to the weary jingle of

the merry-go-round. Before canvas walls, ablaze with kings and lions, stood acrobats and actors, gorgeously bedizened, hoarsely mouthing their offers of entertainment. And above it all, above the steam of the fritter-shops, the sputter of the fat little grease cakes, or "puffers," the big drums, the street songs, somersaults, the jostlings, the vice and the vulgarity—above it all, and beneath the serenely solemn sky, everywhere, in a hundred medallions and paintings, the pure face, no less serenely unconscious, of the little girl-Queen of the Netherlands.

A great deal of it came back to Anneke now from memories of stray visits with her father when she was quite a child. But it was not at all as she had remembered it: it was noisy and common. Where possibly could be the wild delight of the others? No wonder no one ever cared to take her. No wonder they said she was not like other girls.

There were plenty of gingerbread stalls in all directions; there was plenty of gilt on the gingerbread; but to some people gingerbread is quite unattractive, even when all the gilt is still on.

"Now, what would you like to see first?" courteously inquired her companion. "There's a calf with two heads, of which one is a pig's, and there are some capital fighting fleas."

"Let's go to the circus at once," replied Anneke.

"Just as you like, it *is* rather late. And we can go to some of the shows when the circus is over."

They passed in—she paying for the tickets—and through a long, dimly-lit corridor reached their seats. The first thing she noticed on entering was that Truda sat just opposite with her party, and that next to Truda there was a vacant place. Almost simultaneously, as she turned to sit down, a muffled cry escaped her. Her companion had lost his beard, and, with it, his beetling eyebrows. Handsome Harmen stood laughing behind her. "Hush," he said, "it's all right. It's only a joke!"

She had never seen a disguise before: she did not know that beards could be stuck on. As for jokes, she had small experience of those also. *They* knew, then—they would all know—that she had come to Overstad to hire a companion! She sat down in her seat and quietly cried.

"Don't," he whispered presently, "the others will notice." She stopped crying at once. "And, besides, I can't bear to see you do it. Let's be pleasant and enjoy ourselves. Look, they're going to begin!" A couple of clowns came leaping and laughing into the ring. Harmen settled down to the delights of the performance. Anneke tried to turn her eyes

from the gay party opposite, who were evidently discussing and deriding her. She knew Harmen Reys but little: he was not of her village. She had always admired him from a distance: he was dashing, good-looking, his gaze was a caress. In these clothes he appeared different, almost a gentleman. She wondered what he wanted, what he intended to do.

The performance proceeded, and the people opposite grew restless. Truda, especially, began to make signs to her lover. In the first interval of ten minutes, when the circus half emptied, these appeals grew obstreperous. Tony came across and said something to Harmen. "You be hanged!" was the audible answer, the only one he got.

Innocent as Anneke might be—and she remained a woman, with all womanly instincts—she could not help realising that Truda was claiming her lover.

"Truda wants you," she said softly.

"Let her want," was his reply.

"But—I think you ought to go to her."

"I so seldom do what I ought to."

"You might begin now."

"Do you know, I almost think I am beginning."

"Oh, what a leap that horse gave!"

"Did it frighten you?"

"No; only startled. I'm not soon afraid of horses."

"I thought you were such a coward. Truda says so."

"P'rhaps I am. I'm afraid of what wants to hurt me."

"Nod away, Truda, nod away. You nod back to her, little Anneke; enjoy your triumph while you can!"

"What triumph?" asked Anneke.

He laughed at her. "Can't you really guess?" he said.

Yes, she could guess. She could see that, for some reason or other, Harmen, remaining beside her —Harmen, the Don Juan of the moment—openly flouted his sweetheart before her friends. He was noticeably amiable to Anneke; he got her a glass of lemonade and refused to let her pay for it. Other girls looked up at him as he bent over her, twirling his moustache. Certainly, for the moment, her success was complete. She smiled; she thought him delightful. He gave her his arm when the performance was over; and, ignoring the now utterly annihilated Truda, led out the lady of his choice.

They went into some of the shows together, Anneke selecting a menagerie and a collection of stereoscopic views. Harmen yawned, but acquiesced.

"And now," he said, "we must go and eat

waffles." He conducted her to a white-and-gold pavilion, gay with the movements of immaculate cooks. He was making for a cabinet at the back.

"Not there, please," said Anneke. "Here in front we can see the people passing."

"But we want to be alone, do we not?"

"No."

A long silence followed the answer. They ate their waffles among the smells and the uproar.

"You're not the best of company to go Kermessing with," said Harmen. But a moment later he entirely changed his tone. He was very gentle and sympathetic, full of friendly interest. He told her how often he had pitied and admired her: how Truda's coarseness had long disgusted him—he had never been actually engaged to Truda; how this evening's *ruse* had simply been a means of approaching the better woman, Anneke, just the kind and tender helpmate for a scapegrace anxious to reform. All this music he poured into her unreluctant ears, amidst the clash of cymbals and the caterwaulings, and the ceaseless "By your leave!" of the white-clad waiters, who, the waffles being eaten, now wanted these customers to depart. But the heads of the couple bent lower and their murmurs grew softer, and people respect that sort of thing at fair-time,

especially the caterers, who know it to be the corner-stone on which the whole erection rests.

When she lifted her eyes at last, there was a happiness in them such as comes to no woman twice. She believed in him, purely, implicitly.

"I want to go home," she said.

"What, now? Why, the fun is only just beginning."

"I want to go to the station"—she detained him. "Alone."

An oath escaped from his lips. It hurt her, but not disagreeably. It reminded her of the only man who had loved her before, and sworn at her.

"Why, what a fool you are!" he said. "Come along with me, and we——"

"I am going to the station," she interrupted him. "Good-night."

She ran off into the darkness, thinking of nothing but joy. Her triumph of the evening she had entirely forgotten. On reaching the railway she asked for the train. They laughed at her: it had left twenty minutes ago. Then first since leaving home she glanced at a clock.

The only train now available did not stop at her village. She would have to walk six miles in the middle of the night. Worse than that, she would get

home, with the key in her pocket, an hour after Uncle Pete. She dimly wondered whether Harmen had known about the time? No, he was a good man. She knew already that she would get to love him. He must go to Uncle Pete, and obtain the old man's leave to court her. Uncle Pete was anxious she should marry: there would be no objection on his part. How nobly Harmen had spoken! Already she admired him from the bottom of her heart.

She got out at the other station and flew along the road. How glorious was the stillness around her, the mild light of the great yellow moon among the poplars and across the broad fields, where the cattle occasionally moved. All about her was softness, and sweetness, and silence: the roar of the evening seemed centuries away. And Harmen had truthfully told her he cared for her! Were this little soul of ours less infinite than heaven, how could it contain the whole of heaven for an hour?

As she approached the cottage, she saw that the old man was pacing up and down in front of it. She had known that he would be there, infuriate. But somehow, timid as she usually was, she had not found time to think of him.

"Hussy!" he shouted, as soon as she was near enough. And then he used a yet uglier word. He

looked a grotesque figure in the moonlight, with his round umbrella and tall hat.

She hurried to open the door, that she might the sooner conceal his shouting. She was glad when they were safe in the cottage together, and the storm of his wrath broke loose over her alone. She listened, shrinking back, but calmly inattentive. He had never abused her thus before, only grumbled. But then, she had never given him cause.

"Gad, I have found you out!" he cried, "with your smooth white face and soft church manners! Go your ways, as much as you choose: only don't bring the brats to me!"

In an instant the brutal words turned her heart to stone. She faced her uncle, upright, by the flaring tallow candle. "I am sorry I missed my train," she said.

"And he let you come back by yourself?" asked Pete, more soberly, but with a sneer.

"I went alone. I met Harmen Reys. He was alone too. So we went to the circus together."

"Really? And that was all?"

"No." Her voice and manner again grew gentle. "He told me—uncle—he was fond of me"—very softly. "It seems he has thought—thought so for

some time. He is going to ask you about it." Her head sank on her breast.

Old Pete sat down, and laughed till he shook.

"He's been in a mighty hurry about it!" chuckled old Pete. "Lor', it can't be more than three days ago that I told him about my money."

Anneke looked up, suddenly anxious. "What?" she said. "What do you mean?"

"He was mighty inquisitive about my money, he was. Who was I going to leave it to? I told him, you! Lor', what fools men are! I told him, you! By my mother's grave, I did."

"Uncle!" her voice wavered between gratitude and distress.

"And so I shall; it's true enough! Aren't you my natural, lawful heir? Only—I ain't got any money to leave, not a hundred florins, I ain't. The money was your dead aunt's, and she left it all to Truda. The notary's got it, in the city. And whatever I saved—though that ain't much—was to go to Truda also; that was what she made me agree to, and sign at the notary's. 'The savings is my money; I won't have it go to your beggarly family,' she says. But I ain't saved much, I'm a poor man, a poor man, Anneke. And, besides, I ain't going to die yet awhile!" He

sat gloomily staring at the candle, in his big tattered armchair.

"Lor', what a lark!" he said, brightening up again. "He's a cool chap, that Reys. I hadn't never meant to tell you, till after I was dead. But it's greater fun telling you now, and you deserve it for letting me stand about in the dark for two mortal hours. And me that tired!"

"I don't believe it," she said bitterly. She had never spoken so to him before. "Nobody can ever believe you," she went on. "Nobody does. You can't have waited more than one hour, for instance. You always tell lies."

His pimpled face grew black with thunder. He pushed back the old tall hat, and leant forward on the umbrella. "I can tell truth when I choose," he said slowly, "as well as anybody. You'll never have a halfpenny of mine, you slut. All of it goes to Truda."

She flung herself forward, suddenly, desperately; the candle streamed against her cheek. "Swear it to me," she cried hoarsely. "Swear it. Say you swear it by your mother's grave."

"Lor'," he answered, "have you found that out? Well, every man has his weakness. I'll swear it, if you like, by my sister's grave, and by my mother's, too."

She turned her back on him. "Good night," she said, and went upstairs with her candle.

The old man, left in the dark, holloaed to her in vain; then, striking a light for himself, he went and banged against her door. He got no answer. Worn out, he stumbled and tumbled into bed, immediately falling asleep.

Next morning, at the usual hour, Anneke, with drawn features and red-rimmed eyes, came down and went about her work. To her uncle she spoke when necessary. Frequently she looked out of window. Her geranium-pots lay smashed outside—old Pete had done that in his rage last night, before the fastened door. She cleared up the mess and hurried in again. She was ashamed to show her face outside the door, until she knew how matters would come to stand between her and her last night's lover. She had always been a good girl—hitherto that had been her one satisfaction and solace.

Towards noon Harmen Reys came lounging along the canal and across the open space between the inn and the clump of cottages. Anneke laid down the pan she was scouring, and walked out to him at once in the laughing summer sunshine.

"Harmen Reys," she began, ignoring his pleasant greeting, "first of all I want to tell you this. What my

uncle said to you was a lie, or as good as a lie. When he comes to die, all his money will go to Truda. I shall not have a penny. His money was all his wife's."

Harmen Reys' fair face flushed with swift annoyance. "Oh, nonsense. That can't be true," he said. "It's a lie of the old man's, Anneke." Truda had come out of the inn, and advanced halfway towards them. She stood irresolute—her eyes aflame.

"No, Harmen, it is true. He will leave me what he has, but then he has nothing to leave me. I thought you ought to know." Her tones were wistful, though her face was firm. "I know it's true. I am sure. But—Harmen——" She checked herself.

The handsome corporal slowly lifted his cap, and slightly bent his head. Then, leaving her standing there, he walked straight across to Truda.

"Well," he said, extending his hand, "confess that I've paid you out for that slap in the face you gave me!"

THE MOTHER.

THE MOTHER.

I.

In the long grey twilight of the chilly autumn evening the old woman stood gazing down the far descent of road. Around her the inhospitable pine-woods sank into the distance, darkling, on both sides of the desolate hill. Not a leaf stirred; the solemn stillness lay unbroken, but for the monotonous dripping of many thousand trees.

From her solitary cottage near the summit, half hidden behind a low bank of firs, a faint gleam of firelight deepened across the approaching dusk. Down the hills stretched straight the narrow line of the by-road, dull yellow, faintly shiny, pointing its weary, immovable length to the darkness, the village, the haunts and bright conversation of men.

"He's very late," said the old mother aloud. "I'm thinking he gets to be later. But no wonder, he likes a chat down in the village; why shouldn't he have

it? Last year I could see to that far clump of firs, where my father killed the fox."

She went back to the cottage, stumbling along beneath the heavy damp of the trees. The supper-pot was bubbling over. A magpie hung by the darkening window. "All right!" said the magpie. "Go away!"

"La, Blackie, it's me!" replied his mistress, lifting a skinny arm to light the lamp. "You surely don't want me to take myself off? I'm thinking you'd lose the only companion you ever had. You stupid, you took me for a tramp!"

"All right!" said the magpie, who may, or may not, have had recollections of other companions across field and forest, but who certainly now would have known Widow Quint's step at any time. His vocabulary was limited, like his list of acquaintances. Of these latter he had two: the widow, who loved, the widow's son, who ignored him. Likewise, for all contingencies of his tiny existence, he was possessed of two utterances which amply sufficed his philosophy—"All right!" "Go away!"

"La, it's not really late!" exclaimed the widow, who, like most lonely persons, spoke frequently aloud. "'Tis the days growing shorter misled me!" She stood, studying the cuckoo clock. "Not yet five o'clock,

and the paraffin two cents dearer! But I always have dreaded the boy's being late. Now, 'tis just my foolish fancy. Yes, Blackie, your mistress is simply a fool! Dear, how often my John would say that, and never mean it! Nor he couldn't bear anyone else to repeat it; well he knew who it was had the clearer head of the two!" She laughed softly to herself, a tender little pitying laugh. "God 'a mercy on him," she said, looking into the supper-pot. "The onions are browning beautiful. Isaac'll be in before the cuckoo strikes again!"

"Go away," said the magpie.

The old woman stopped stirring. "Drat the bird!" she ejaculated. "Blackie, you ought to be whipped, if only you was built accordin'. I can't think why the little brute never took to the boy, and he the best boy that ever was—aye, or will be! No, that's saying too much, but one soon thinks one's owl an eagle." The widow never sought an explanation in the fact that the boy, being jealous of his mother's affection, had not shown a liking for the bird. She had been slow to learn, through her own life's experience, that love is with most of us largely a matter of take.

For more than sixty years she had lived in this lonely cottage; she had been born in it, an only daughter, and after her mother's death, she, then

being fifteen, had taken the vacant place by the taciturn widower's side. When the bloom of her youth had faded away from her, the father, also dying, left Mary alone in an unknown world. She had been an under-keeper in the service of the baron to whom the woods belonged. A new man, some seven years her junior, was appointed to the post and the cottage; a difference of opinion arose as to the value of her father's old bureau; he proposed that she should settle it by marrying him, and she accepted the offer, for why should she do anything else?

By the time her first babies were born she was nearing forty. The three eldest children successively died, in infancy or in early childhood, torn from a grasp whose despair might have vanquished any power but Death. The youngest only survived—Isaac.

It was after two long years of silence that his feeble puling once more seemed to fill the cottage; she never for a moment doubted that this son of her decline had come to stay.

"He will be the prop of my old age," she said. "I shall live to kiss his children."

"Our times are in God's hand," said the minister, sitting by the bedside, very solemn.

"And a good thing, too," replied Mary Quint. "I'm thinking God remembered that when He sent

me my Isaac. I shall laugh over him as Sarah did."

"My good woman, you've got your facts wrong," objected the minister peevishly. He was hot from his long walk, and he disapproved of poor people's talking nonsense or sentiment.

Mary hugged to her breast one small fact she had got right. "Please, Dominé," she said a little anxiously, "you won't object to my calling him Isaac?"

"I hope it's a family name," said the Dominé.

"Oh, it's bound to be that," replied Mary. "'Tis a name in your family, isn't it, John?"

"Surely," assented her husband, who was sometimes good-natured and never over-scrupulous, and who cared for nothing in the world but drink.

"Isaac let the young child be then," declared the minister, rising pompously, "and may he indeed prove a Son of the Promise! Quint, I'm going. It's an hour and a quarter from here to the village."

"Surely," said the under-keeper again, rising to accompany his rare visitor to the door, "for a gentleman it would be. The likes of me does it in fifty-five minutes; but what is the likes of me?"

"All men are alike, Quint—ahem!—before God," replied the minister, annoyed; "but our physical powers undeniably vary. That is of little consequence,

however, for the Bible expressly warns us that bodily exercise profiteth nothing."

"Does the Bible tell such a—thing as that?" cried the keeper, amazed.

"Certainly," replied the stodgy little parson, reprovingly. "You should read your Bible, Quint." He paused just outside the threshold. "How old is your wife?"

"Thirty-nine come next April, God willing," replied the keeper promptly. He always deducted a couple of years from his consort's actual age: he called this "splitting the difference."

The Dominé meditatively shook his big head.

"She has foolish ideas," he said. "I fear she is rather a foolish woman, Quint."

"Yes, Dominé, so she tells me herself," replied the keeper, "over and over again; but still I can hardly believe it. There never was anyone like her for cooking and baking. She's got no book-learning to boast of; but then, as I'm always a-telling her, we can't all get clothed and educated at other people's expense" —the Dominé winced: he was a charity-boy. "Now, what use would your reverence, saving your presence, be in a family, with washin' and bakin'? She sees it at once, sir. No use at all."

"Good day," said the Dominé. The keeper went back to the inner room, where his wife lay. "John,

come and look at little Isaac," said a voice from the press-bed. "He's got a dimple in his chin, John, just like what my father had."

"You're a fool," replied the husband, filling his pipe. "You always was."

Little Isaac grew up, and his dimple deepened. He was an easy-going child, all good-nature and love of tranquillity. He took an early dislike to his father's vehement caresses and violent abuse: on the whole, he experienced a distinct sensation of pleasure when, before his seventh year had reached its completion, the noisy, brawling voice dropped out of his existence, and he was left alone in the cottage with a mother whose love and whose anger were both equably righteous and calm.

The closing year or two of John Quint's poor life had been one black tempest of drunkenness, lighted up by fierce flashes of repentance. At last the thing happened which the wife had long trembling foreseen. On a dark December night the keeper stumbled once too often. Next morning they brought him to his cottage shot through the head. The widow thanked the sympathetic and the curious before she bade them go. "I'm not accustomed," she said, "to seeing so many people about me. It confuses me." All slunk away, except the minister.

"Mary," began the minister, "this is a dreadful visitation."

She sat by the fireside, her face averted from the bed, frightened, little Isaac plucking at her knee.

"Ahem!" continued the minister, "it is a visitation, and also a warning to all of us" ("us," indeed! he thought). Unconsciously he fingered the blue ribbon at his button-hole. "Alas! there can be no doubt that your husband was under the influence"—mechanically he bent over the bedside: at one leap the woman lay between him and the corpse!

"Tut! tut!" exclaimed the minister, starting back. Little Isaac, upset on the hearthstone, began to cry shrilly. "Hist!" said his mother. And he stopped.

"Why this futile palliation?" cried the minister, audibly snuffling. "Mary, I trust you have not learnt to feel sympathy for your poor husband's failing. Your life is too lonely up here, my good woman. Well, an end will now soon come to that. You will live in the village henceforth, and your child——"

"Dominé, please go away," said the widow, shielding the dead man behind her.

"Oh, of course, if you wish it," replied the minister, in high dudgeon. "But, observe, I shall not soon come again. The distance from the village is more

than an hour and a quarter, and if it had not been for John Bost's meeting me with his cart——"

"The cart is waiting," said the widow; "I hear the harness jingle."

"Certainly it is waiting. He was afraid of his horse catching cold up here. But I said I must speak to the widow. What is the chance—the off-chance—of a horse catching cold, compared to—to—a human soul?"

"The widow!" Mary Quint winced at the novel title which would henceforth always be hers. But she only held out her hand to her son without stirring from her guard.

The Dominé departed towards the door. "Take care that you do not make an Ishmael of your Isaac," he said with a suave relish, "you Hagar in the desert!" Thus he retreated in triumph, eager to repeat to Petronella, his sister, who was proud of him, this new specimen of his wit. The Dominé was still young; he would yet have numerous opportunities of increasing in foolishness.

The widow, left in peace, sat gazing at her dead husband, and gradually a few tears rolled down her cheek. "I'm sorry," she said softly. "I—I don't think it was exactly love, John; not as some wives feel; but perhaps that is my fancy. I think I did my

best—and you did yours. I'm very sorry." The boy, pulling at her skirts, whined for her to come away. She followed him to the window; a wintry drizzle fell slanting against the black outline of the firs. "Isaac," she said, but she spoke to herself—"Isaac!" She lifted his face to her own. "Isaac, if I'd never had children, I don't think I'd ever have known!" She let the boy's head drop and looked out into the rain.

A few days later, when the funeral was over and everybody had forgotten her, and everything went on again, she dressed in her best mourning, took her boy by the hand, and trudged away to the village and the great house beyond. She left the child at the lodge: then she faced the hall door, the big dog, and the butler.

"Quint!" said the grey-haired Lord of the Manor, glancing over his glasses and joining his finger-tips. "Yes, of course, Quint! Very sad." Then he looked down at his writing-table, and, being a kind-hearted man, reflected what a bore things were.

"Yes, it certainly was very sad," he repeated, wheeling round to the figure in black, "and also——" he checked himself, "very sad."

"Mynheer the Baron, my father served you faithfully," said the widow, "for more than forty years."

"Yes, of course," replied the Baron. Then the incongruousness of his expression, in our present dispensation, struck home to him. "I mean, of course, I am aware of the fact."

"And my husband—did his best," continued Mary tremulously. "Mynheer the Baron, I don't mean to speak about that, but I've lived in the cottage more than half a century!"

"Whew!" said the Baron. "I see. 'Tis a lonely cottage. You'll be much better down in the village."

"And now my one hope and prayer is this, that Mynheer will let me stay on up there with the child! I've never asked anyone anything. I don't know how to speak properly—much less to Mynheer the Baron." The widow clasped her hands in front of her. "I've always lived alone."

"Seems to me you know how to ask right enough," said the Baron with testy good-humour. "The cottage has invariably gone with the place."

"I could do a certain amount of the work, Mynheer, saving your presence." Baron Varik laughed, glanced up, and suddenly steadied his features. "I could look after the firewood, for instance, and keep off children and vagrants——"

"And catch the poachers," interrupted the Baron.

"No," said the widow; and yet, but for womanly

unobtrusiveness, she might have told him how twice her keen watchfulness had enabled her muddle-headed husband to effect an arrest. "No, I couldn't pretend to be aught of a gamekeeper or claim aught of a gamekeeper's pay."

"Oh, of course, I must make some arrangement when you leave," said the Baron hastily. "A small pension——" He paused, unwilling to commit himself, for these things were done by rule.

"'Tis the cottage I want!" cried the widow, forgetting all timidity. "I've been born there, Mynheer the Baron: and there's no habit grows on one like loneliness. And my boy, that's seven already, must grow up to be the Baron's keeper, and live in the cottage as the rest of us have done!"

"Seven!" exclaimed the Baron, still fretfully smiling. "He'll take time, my good woman, to grow up!"

"He'll do it as fast as he can," replied the widow. "Nobody shall do it faster. It don't take long to grow up!"

"Good Lord, no, that's true!" exclaimed the Baron. "It seems only yesterday I was a small boy myself!" and he went into the next room, where his wife was sitting with some fancy-work before her.

"My dear, here is the Widow Quint," he said,

"and she asks to be my under-keeper!" and then he told her all. "My father built the cottage on purpose for the under-keeper to live in," he grumbled, "and she can't support herself on the pension, besides."

"My dear," said the Baroness, smiling, "your reason for wishing a thing to be done is always that it has been done before."

"And a very good reason too," retorted her husband. "If you wish her to have the cottage, of course she must have it. She ought to go down to the village and work."

"Surely I expressed no opinion," replied the Baroness, still smiling over her work. "Far less did I give advice. If she does half a keeper's work, couldn't she get half a keeper's pay?"

The Baron drummed his fingers against the window-pane. "But, then, how am I to *book* that?" he burst out at last, in evident distress. "The pension I can book as has always been done. It comes under 'III—The Estate.'"

"Book it as treasure laid up in heaven," said the Baroness.

"That is 'Charity—VIII,'" replied the Baron. "I wonder whether my steward will consider that correct?"

"Before I married you," continued the lady smoothly, "I imagined that only shop-people 'booked.'"

"My dear, do not let us return to that fruitful, and fruitless, subject of discussion. I will do as you wish about the widow," he sighed. "She might at least have been young and good-looking."

"Vrouw Quint? She has a very striking appearance. I notice her every Sunday in church."

"Every Sunday you go," corrected the Baron, and, with that parting bit of compensation, he went back to Vrouw Quint.

"You can have the cottage," he said quickly, "and half your husband's wages, and the usual pension. And you must do half your husband's work. You must arrange about that with the head-keeper, Basset."

For a moment the widow stood silent. "I'm a bad hand at speaking my thanks," she said then, "but I'm thinking Mynheer the Baron feels them."

"Egad, my wife's right," thought the Baron; "the woman has fine eyes."

"Oh, I hope Basset won't mind!" exclaimed the widow.

The Lord of the Manor bit his lip. "You must distinctly understand that a certain amount of work will be required of you, for the pay—you understand me?—must come out of the estate."

"I understand, Mynheer the Baron," said the widow, in the doorway. "And Isaac, when grown up, must make good all my deficiency."

The Baron followed her, fearing he had seemed unkind. "So Isaac is to be trained for my service?" he said pleasantly.

The widow stopped under the hall lamp. "Please God," she said vehemently, all her gratitude bursting forth, "he shall learn to be such a servant to your honour as few masters have had before!"

"Tut, tut! I am nearly sixty-five," said the Baron.

"Who knows what may befall?" replied the widow. "Was I not an old maid at thirty-five? And see, I am a widow before fifty!" She went back to the lodge and fetched Isaac, giving a penny to each of the lodge-keeper's stolidly astonished children. That night she cried over the boy long and silently: he always remembered those tears as the last he saw his mother shed.

Then the current of their lives, unbroken now by squalls, flowed smoothly onward. But Isaac easily comprehended that absence of storm-winds did not mean a licence to drift, and he opened his sails, as small mariners will, to a gentle, but consistent, breeze. He grew up conscious that he might do what he liked as long as he liked no wrong. There came a

period, vainly delayed, when he must frequent the far-off village school. His mother could not leave her forest, where less wood was now stolen (as Basset unwillingly admitted) and fewer snares were set than on any other part of the estate. She bade the boy "God-speed," and ridiculed his dread of the lonely roads; but she spent days and nights in anxiety and supplication. Every morning she watched his shiny knapsack out of sight; every evening she toiled to the turnpike to meet him. She loved the glint of the knapsack, and polished it long after other children's had dulled to a rusty brown.

Isaac, with his good looks and good humour, all blue eyes and broad dimples, did well at school, and wherever he went. He preferred not to exert himself by nature, but whatever duty gave pleasure to his mother he was always prepared to perform. Once or twice he was first of his class for her sake, and on the occasion of a national festival he recited a patriotic poem in the courtyard of the manor-house before all the school, half the manor-house servants, and the manor-house family itself. "The boy's a good boy," said the Baroness graciously. "He has a good mother. But he's very unlike you in face, Vrouw Quint."

That night his elation was damped by his mother's unreasonable crossness, a thing he was least of all

accustomed to. He burst out at last with suppressed irritation—

"Why, mother, whatever have I done?"

"Hush!" she said. "Nothing, Isaac. You can't help it, boy. I was only thinking. The Baroness was right: you are much like your father in manner as well as in face."

"Is that what you are angry with me for?" he questioned sullenly.

"God forbid!" she exclaimed with superfluous vehemence. "Isaac, never dare to say anything like that again!"

The boy shrank back, cowed.

An hour later she crept up the few steps to his garret. "You are a good boy," she said in the dark. "Oh, Isaac, you are all I have! Promise me you will always be good."

"I promise," he answered under the bedclothes. And then she kissed him—an unusual thing—kissed him through the sheet.

He was thirteen now, and school days were over. She got him taken as odd boy at the home farm. He brought his first week's single florin home to his mother, and, whatever may have happened before or after, that remained the proudest moment of Mary Quint's whole life.

"Isaac," she said, "you are not a man yet; but, also, you are no longer a child. You are one of Mynheer's servants. Remember this—remember what I told you—whatever you do for Mynheer, you can never repay our debt."

"I intend to do my best," he answered. But she caught him by the arm.

"Isaac, my Son of the Promise," she cried, drawing him towards her, "I have toiled night and day for this moment! Isaac, you will be faithful, will you not?"

He looked up into her pallid face. "Why, yes, mother," he said. "Oh, you've been a good mother to me, mother! I love you heart and soul!"

A couple of years later the steward sent him to assist the widow, and gradually he took upon himself all the work that had once been his father's. The Baron, meeting Vrouw Quint in a plantation, informed her, with a sigh of relief, that she now would receive only her pension. "And mind you henceforth do no manner of work," said the Baron, with a twinkle in his eye. "I have no objection to your living with your son if you wish. But should I catch you feeding pheasants, I must send you away. You are pensioned as an underkeeper's widow. You are booked as pensioned. Good day!"

II.

THE widow sat by the fireside waiting, as she waited every evening of her life. Presently Isaac would come in from his work, and then she would forget she had waited.

There came a knock at the door, and the widow looked up surprised.

"Go away!" cried the magpie, for that was his rule after sunset.

The widow placed her hand on the bolt, but the voices outside reassured her.

She admitted two "neighbours"—a mile across country!—the big farm-wife, Vrouw Brodel, with her pretty daughter Christine.

"We are late," remarked the farm-wife, panting; "one of our men should have met us at the village. Woman, I wonder you're not afraid to be murdered. Some day you will be. I *am* afraid, and I'd thought perhaps Isaac—— Hold your tongue, Christine; I shall say as I choose."

Pretty Christine had been shaking her head to

the widow. The latter flashed her eyes on her. Pretty Christine looked away.

"Men murder with an object," said the widow's grave voice. "I expect Isaac in every minute. He will gladly walk home with you."

"Oh, no, no," murmured pretty Christine, with deep energy. "Please tell mother, Vrouw Quint, the roads are perfectly safe!"

"I have been out on them and in the wood these sixty-three years, night and day," said the widow, "and never met with an injury from man or from beast."

"Quite possible," replied the farm-wife, and insolently jingled her heavy gold ear-rings. "But *I* am afraid. It seems to me, widow, your Isaac comes home very late!"

"Yes, yes, we can't possibly wait for him! We *can't* wait for Isaac," cried pretty Christine.

"All right. Go away," said the magpie.

The widow lifted her gaze to Vrouw Brodel's red face. "Ah, what time, pray, neighbour," she said coldly, "do you deem that my son should be in?"

But the other, vexed to find herself thwarted, replied with much spite: "At the time when all other men are back with their wives. 'Tis not good for young blood to remain single, neighbour Quint."

The widow's eyes flashed. "Isaac always leaves work last," she said proudly. She tapped on the floor with her foot.

"It's going to rain, mother," interposed the girl's voice from the window. "We must hurry if we want to get home!"

At these words the farm-wife, who had on her best cream-ribboned bonnet, hastened out to inspect the black sky.

"Well," she said desperately, "Isaac may not be here before midnight! You should keep him in better order. Catch *my* sons not turning up at meal-times! Well, neighbour, good-night!"

The widow's indignation did not permit her to answer. She sat by the table, and was angry with the cuckoo for his ostentatious proclamation of the half-hour. "But the woman is a fool," she said aloud. "A mother, and not to fathom her own daughter's heart! Aha! little Christine, I found out your secret six months ago—in one flash of the eye, at the church door, in passing! You won't cheat *this* mother, Christine—that's his step!"

The keeper came in, accompanied by his dog, Beppo. He was a tall fellow, well-built, in his faded brown clothes, and his boyish good looks suited well with the great leather boots and the gun.

"You have just missed Vrouw Brodel," said his mother. "She was here not ten minutes ago."

"Indeed!" said the son, hanging up his empty game-bag.

"But I suppose you don't mind about that? She wanted you to see her safe home."

"Another time I shall be very willing. After supper, if possible."

"Christine was with her. Christine is very pretty, Isaac."

"Yes, mother, but I couldn't have seen much of her good looks in the dark. I'm very hungry."

"Well, supper has been waiting some time."

They ate in silence. Constant seclusion had made them a taciturn pair.

Besides, the widow was screwing up her devotion to a lengthily meditated step. As she cleared up the remnants—at a moment when her face was turned away from him—she began:

"You're a grown man now, Isaac, nearly four-and-twenty. It's time you were marrying, I sometimes think." Her own voice startled her, saying the terrible words.

He had risen to light his pipe. He stopped in the act. "Why, mother, are you tired of looking after me?" he said.

She did not answer, but turned. They stood facing each other for a moment, then, before he knew what he was doing, he had thrown his arms round her neck.

"Have done, Isaac, have done!" cried the widow. "For shame! A grown man to be kissing! You haven't done that since you was quite a small boy!"

The keeper went back to the hearth.

"Nor you haven't talked of turning me out," he said; then his face grew long, and he puffed in silence at the freshly lighted pipe. At last he said gravely: "I don't intend to marry."

"Why?" exclaimed the widow, anxiety mingling with exultation in her accent. And as he did not immediately answer: "Men ought to marry. Don't think I'm selfish; I should rejoice to see you marry a good girl like Christine!"

Isaac drew the dog towards him, perhaps hardly conscious that he did so. Presently, looking his mother full in the face, "Would you really?" he asked. For a moment she did not answer; then she simply said, "Yes." She sat down in her usual arm-chair, and began at her interminable knitting. The clock ticked.

"Isaac, how strange your manner is!" she said, after a long silence; she was knitting on very fast. "Why, boy, if I didn't know all your heart, and you an

honest lad from your earliest youth upward, as I well know you are and always will be—why, Isaac——"

"Well?" he said, his chin set firm on the palm of his hand.

"Well! Nothing. If I didn't—but, you see, I do!"

"Mother, I don't understand you."

"Yes you do, Isaac. You and I have always understood each other, thank God! And I thank Him, too, that when your time comes, there'll be nothing to prevent your asking an honest maiden to be your wife. I hope it'll come soon, Isaac. Before God, I do." She rose to quit the room that he might not see her face.

"Mother!" he cried after her, "wait a moment. I must be off again to-night."

"Off!" she exclaimed, in troubled amazement. "Why, it's getting to be every night, it is! It didn't use to be so in your father's time. I can't think what Basset means by it!"

"Basset?" repeated the son. "'Tisn't Basset. I like to take a look round before turning in."

"Ah, I told Susan Brodel that was *your* view of work!" said the widow triumphantly.

He reddened in the glow of the fire. She drew nearer and began gently stroking his yellow hair.

"Don't," he said, "don't!"

"It rejoices my heart to see how faithfully you

serve your master. But, Isaac, I can't help disliking your being out thus night after night. I lie and think of those long hours when I used to wait for your father. And one morning they brought him me, dead!" She shuddered ever so slightly.

The son smoked. Again a heavy silence sank between them. At last he said: "I have never asked you before. I have never asked anyone. To-night we are speaking of many things—strange things. Tell me—what made my father's gun go off?"

She stood behind him immovable.

"Keepers' guns don't," said the son, smoking.

"Hush!" The cuckoo burst out, hooted eight hideous calls, and disappeared. The room grew doubly silent.

"Was it a poacher killed him?"

"No."

"Then he was drunk!" Isaac spoke thickly. The words came pouring out. "It was that, I am sure of it. I have always known it, though I never dared to ask. You spoke of him, mother, so—so tenderly. I was very little when it happened; nobody told me. Somehow I have always known it, dreaded it. My God, he was drunk!"

She neither moved nor spoke.

"That is why you hate drunkenness so madly!"

His voice rose to a cry. "Now I understand! I have always understood. My God!"

"Hush, Isaac. Be silent. It is not for you to judge your father. Be thankful you have not his temptation. He was a good man. We all have our failings. Be humble, and, above all, give thanks!"

"Nay, I do not judge him. I do not judge him," said Isaac. "I, least of all." Then for more than an hour they sat side by side without exchanging another word. Once or twice the dog, half rising, licked his master's hand. From time to time, as the hands neared the hour, Isaac glanced up almost apprehensively at the clock.

"I hate that cuckoo," he said suddenly. And he went to get his cap and gun.

"Why, Isaac, how silly you are! You said that the other day."

"Well, I do. One never knows when it is going to burst out at one."

"At the hour and the half-hour," said the widow coolly. She picked up her ball. "Jane, at the turnpike, has one that calls out the quarters."

"Well, that would almost be better." He walked to the door. "How you can endure him and the magpie in the silence is more than I understand. Well, mother, you've a good conscience. Remember

your promise; you won't sit up. Beppo, look after your mistress."

The widow gazed up at the offending clock, at the fast-closed little door, which, in another moment or two, would fly open with a bang. "La! he couldn't wish me," she reflected, "not to know what o'clock it was! And how should I know he was near coming home? 'Tis my one comfort, is the cuckoo and Blackie. All right, Blackie; all right; all right."

"Go away!" replied Blackie, who hated being disturbed of nights.

Isaac walked on very fast at first through the drip-drop of the woods; then, presently, he slowed down as a man who comes to himself and realises that he is hurrying nowhere. He paused, struck off to the right with apparent resolve, hesitated, walked on a few paces, turned back again.

"Oh God!" he said, under his breath. "Oh God!"

Something stirred in the black masses of underwood beside him. Some bird, half aroused from its sleep. He went on through the dripping darkness, twisting backwards and forwards with swift indecision, not as if stalking or doubling, but like an animal attracted to one spot, and as fatally repelled.

A grey stain showed on the footpath a few yards in front of him. It rose, screeching, across the dense

branches—an owl! For a space its shrieks followed him through the stillness. Then again all was silent: the cloud-masses deepened in swift changes overhead.

"What a night for the poachers!" he thought. "Would to Heaven they but came!"

He was walking quite fast again, away into desolate spaces, the wide mist of the heath. He stood still.

"'Tis no use," he said aloud, "I can't help it. Oh God, you see that I can't!" He faced round, and soon the swiftness of his steps almost changed to a run.

In the thickest of the forest he broke away from the narrow footpath and dodged rapidly amongst the trees. At last, pausing for breath, he halted before a big oak, no more noticeable than the others around it. But Isaac, without any hesitation now, plunged a feverish hand into the hidden recesses of its stem, and, drawing forth a bottle, drank greedily and long.

"Ah!" he said in a deep sigh which seemed to linger on the stillness. He walked leisurely now, up and down, with the bottle in one hand. And from time to time he took a slow draught in the tranquil dark and the silence, sometimes with a half-suppressed shudder of content.

He was thinking of his mother's words about her dead husband: "Your father was a good man, Isaac. He had his weaknesses—who has not? But he was

a good man." Never had he realised his powerlessness more deeply than to-night. "Mother, you would say the same of me. God grant you may never have occasion!" He lifted his handsome face as if to the lowering clouds above him. "I can't help myself!" he cried aloud, and then his voice dropped to a whisper. "Never," he said. "No, little Christine, I may be a coward, but I'll never be a cad." With a swing of the arm, he flung his gun back and started homewards. "Some day I shall end like father," he thought, "but not until mother is dead." He began whistling a music-hall tune of the day.

From a thicket he had just passed, whistling, two men crept forth and looked after him.

"Whistle away, Master Isaac," said one; "here's a hare you may whistle for!"

"Shut up, Tom," replied his elder companion; "he's as smart a keeper as ever stepped, and a very good fellow. There's a hollow oak I've noticed will do first-rate to hide things in. Come along."

Isaac stopped his whistling long before he neared the cottage. And as he crossed its threshold he mechanically drew himself up with a jerk. In the dark the dog, Beppo, struck a light tail along the floor.

"Good night, mother," said Isaac steadily, before the half-open door.

"Good night, boy; good night!"

He tramped upstairs to his garret.

The next day being a Sunday, mother and son spent their morning, according to an invariable rule, in the distant village church. As they came out at the central door the Baron stopped them, and walked a few paces by the widow's side, which mark of favour was the highest that he could confer on any of his humbler dependants. Isaac fell back.

"If it weren't for Sunday church," said the Baron, "I do believe you'd never come down to the village from year's end to year's end. One would think you disliked your neighbours."

"No, indeed. No, indeed," replied the widow. "But, saving your presence, Mynheer the Baron, if you'd lived all your life in the backwoods, you'd feel like a squirrel yourself."

"I wish I were half as frisky," said the Baron. "Well, well, I've no right to complain. I'd never have thought to see Isaac my gamekeeper."

Still hale at eighty something, the Baron walked almost erect.

"And a very good keeper he makes, I'm told," said the Baron cheerfully, nodding his silvery hair.

The old woman, in her stiff cap and gown, smiled. "Thank God and Mynheer the Baron, he is what

he is," she answered; "and I wish he was more. Not that I'm complaining. In some ways 'tis hard work—night after night, and the winter nights a-coming! Don't please think I'm afraid, Mynheer the Baron. I well know every trade has its own peculiar dangers; and wasn't I a keeper's daughter, and a keeper's wife and mother?—and, la! I was a bit of a keeper myself! Still, I'm glad every night of my life to hear my boy's good night."

"But he needn't go out every night of your life," objected the Baron. He struck a little irritably at a pebble with his stick.

Whereupon the widow's serious features assumed that air of tranquil triumph which had been a secret source of amusement to her neighbours ever since the day when she had first led Isaac to the village school.

The Baron now watching her, also laughed good-humouredly. "Well, well, Basset says the hillside woods are the best looked after on the whole estate."

"They were that in my father's time, were they not, Mynheer the Baron?"

"Well, well—perhaps they were. I have an idea, Vrouw Quint, you consider the hillside woods belong to you quite as much as to me?"

"No, Mynheer the Baron," replied the widow gravely. "But I know every stick and every stone

of them, and have done these fifty years. The money value is yours, sir."

"Well, well," said the Baron again, "there's a pretty girl waiting to walk home with you. Isaac is gone, is he? Or only lagging behind? H'm. Good day, Christine Brodel. Good day, Vrouw Quint."

"'Tis a long walk for a girl by herself, Christine," remarked the widow, as they trudged on side by side.

"Father's behind," replied Christine, "with—with Isaac."

"Your mother doesn't come to church as often as she might," continued the widow.

"No, nor Isaac wasn't there last Sunday," said the girl.

"Isaac had some snares to look after," protested the widow quickly. "Well, well," she added in a gentler tone, "your mother's very stout."

"Yea, and she don't like to rob the old horse of his Sunday rest."

"Nor Isaac can't bear to see me start alone. La! 'Judge not that ye be not judged.' You're right, girl; there isn't a truer text in the Bible."

For some minutes after that each was busy with her own thoughts along the sodden road.

"It *is* a great way," said Christine. "Dear, how you must tire of it! But you were born in the cot-

tage, weren't you? and I suppose you'll——" She checked herself.

"No, I shan't," replied the widow coolly. "When my son marries, I take myself off."

"Oh, you couldn't!" exclaimed the girl, all a-blush with vexation. "His wife 'd never—she——"

"Well, she?" said the widow provokingly.

"I don't know anything about her," replied Christine with some spirit, "but the whole country knows about you and your son. Nobody 'd venture to part you, Vrouw Quint."

"Part!" repeated the widow, her eyes far away over the tree-tops. "Divide, you mean? No wife could do that, but she separates. God has willed it so, little Christine. Your father is calling—now, where is that booby of an Isaac? Gone altogether? Disappeared? La! what fools young men are in our days!"

She trudged on alone through the barren autumn landscape, through the sullen autumn day. At the turnpike, where dwelt her nearest neighbour and friend, lame old Kate Lonkeboor, she stopped for a few remarks about the weather, then turned off towards the hill and the woods. She felt tired, and breathed with some difficulty; yet, from old habit, she found it almost impossible to keep to the open road;

before she had gone any distance all trace of her was lost among the trees.

She had penetrated into the heart of her familiar woods, when a low whistle struck suddenly on her ear. She knew the meaning of that whistle immediately. It was a signal. She darted round a low plantation of brushwood, and almost ran up against Tom Bunsing.

"D——," cried the poacher, starting back. Two pheasants hung from his elbow.

"I recognised your whistle!" said the widow quietly. But she gasped.

"D——you for an old spy!" said Tom Bunsing. "I knew your precious son was on t'other side of the hill. Oh, on t'other side—ha! ha!"

"I shall report you to Basset. You shall be prosecuted," said the widow fearlessly.

Tom Bunsing laughed. "No, you won't," he replied threateningly. "You'll keep a quiet tongue in your head. There'll be more reportings some day than you bargain for. Give my love to your dear son, my lady, and tell him I shall drink his health to-night. Ta, ta!"

"Oh, the scoundrel!" cried the widow, trembling with rage. "I shall certainly report you to Basset!"

She hurried on home, full of her indignation. Isaac was pacing the small kitchen in one of his restless moods. She got ready their midday meal. They

had nearly finished it before she told of her adventure with Tom Bunsing.

"What did he say?" exclaimed Isaac, dropping knife and fork. "Did he say that? What did he say, mother, about drinking my health?"

"Goodness, Isaac, what's the matter? How pale you are! You've got cold, these wintry days, in the woods. After dinner I'll make you some——"

"No, no; I'm all right. What did he say about drinking my health?"

"Oh, that was his insolence. I shall certainly tell Basset."

"Mother, I do wish you'd leave the care of the woods to me!"

Her thin cheek coloured ever so faintly, but she only called to the dog. She could make nothing of Isaac's manner. Instead of sitting dozing over the Sunday fire, he started up on the first opportunity and hastened out. The widow remained pensive, occasionally talking to Blackie, for Beppo, his dinner over, had followed his master.

Presently the lame turnpike-woman looked in for a chat, and from Katey Mary Quint learnt, amid a flood of other gossip, that Tom Bunsing had announced his intention of marrying Christine Brodel. For Tom

Bunsing, though he went poaching from sheer devilry, was the son of a small but respectable farmer.

"Aha! I understand!" said the widow to herself.

Isaac, free from the torture of his mother's eyes, tore through the quiet woods to his distant hiding-place. He reached it in a fever of anxiety, and thrust his hand down into the hollow; it struck against the bottles; they were safe.

He laughed aloud. With considerable pains he had procured this store of spirits, buying it in the market-town, at a place where he was entirely unknown, carefully conveying it away and secreting it, a few bottles at a time. Not a soul in the village had ever seen him buy more than one dram; certainly none would have thought the worse of him for doing so; but his mother's peace of mind—his unique preoccupation—was safe. It mattered not, as he often most bitterly told himself, that some day he should become a notorious drunkard, such being his terrible, inevitable fate—if only the grave had first closed on the one heart that loved him! Only so long, so long, Oh God!

He opened one of the bottles, and put it to his lips. Immediately he dropped it, spluttering. It contained nothing but water. The broken pieces lay on the ground. The dog crept up and licked them.

Isaac stood horror-stricken, trying to realise what

this trickery meant. His secret was in the hands of the poachers.

He stood for a long while, but the whirlwind of his thoughts would not twist itself clear. The dog pushed up against him, whining. He stooped and patted it.

Already the dull November day was declining. Suddenly, in a shiver of searching wind, one thought arose before him, terribly distant. The night was coming—it was already there—and he hadn't a drop of drink!

Then the drink-frenzy came upon him—the dread of the approaching craving, the agony of thirst. He shrieked aloud and fled straight across the forest to the hill-road, past the cottage, towards the village, towards the tavern, towards relief! The dog ran panting beside him.

By the time he reached the nearest houses in the twilight the lamps were coming out. The long haste, the increasing desire—these had strained every fibre of his being till he moaned as if in physical pain. He hurried along the deserted street to the public-house. At its door he stood gasping for a moment; then he entered, and, steadying his voice—

"Good evening, Baas Picker—a dram!" he breathed.

A shout of laughter arose from a corner of the badly-lit room. Round a table, in the half-dark, amidst fumes of gin and petroleum, half a dozen choice spirits sat grouped.

The keeper turned and faced them with a violent effort at self-control.

"Let me stand you a glass, Quint," cried the voice of Tom Bunsing.

"Thank you, I can pay for myself," retorted Isaac, with difficulty suppressing his fury. He tossed down the liquor, and felt his brain steady itself. "With honestly-got money," he added.

"You'll want it to supply your cellar," remarked another voice in the dusk.

"Hist!" said an older man.

Isaac stood by the bar, yearning to tear himself away from the deepening disgrace.

"Give me another," he said. "'Tis a very damp night."

Another shout of merriment greeted the words.

"Why, keeper, you're unusually thirsty?" said the publican with a meaning smile.

The men in the corner sat watching.

"I say, Quint," called Tom Bunsing, "friends, you

know—and no harm meant! But your mother had better keep a quiet tongue in her head."

"Hold yours," said Isaac.

The poacher jumped up with an oath, and came forward.

"One more," said Isaac, calmly, "then I'm off."

But nobody laughed this time. The men had gathered round.

"I tell you," began Bunsing, "your mother——"

"If you mention her again in this place, I'll knock you down," said the keeper, pushing back his empty glass.

The other laughed defiantly, though he stepped back a pace.

"Your mother——"

"Do you want any more?" questioned Isaac, as Tom Bunsing picked himself up.

"Look you, I'll have no fighting here," interposed the publican angrily. "Go outside, the whole lot of you, and, Tom, give him as good as you got!"

"I'll give him better—some day," said the crest-fallen hero, rubbing his forehead.

But nobody moved.

"You can find me whenever you want to," retorted Isaac. "Here, Picker, put me up a bottle of gin! Here's the money."

They all stood watching the publican at work. Isaac pushed the bottle into the pocket of his pea-jacket.

"Look here, you fellows," he said in a low, clear voice, "I—I'm an honest man. I've never done any of you an ill-turn. I'll fight any of you, if you wish it, though I don't know why. But no knives." He addressed himself to the older man. "Bost," he said, "make them see they must spare my mother! Don't —don't let it get to my mother! It's a good joke—a capital joke against me. But it'll keep. She's an old woman,"—his voice grew desperate—"don't let it go farther at present! Boys, think of your own—no, it's not the same. Here, do what you like with me, but don't let it get to her!"

The others stood aside, awkward, with evil grins. But Jan Bost stepped forward.

"There's not a soul in the country doesn't honour your mother, Quint. She's a good plucked one, and she got me two days in quod. Nobody'd have the heart or the courage to breathe a word against you in her presence. Here, shake hands, and go home."

The keeper retraced his steps with leaden heart. He chewed tobacco as he went to keep down the smell of the spirits. He must find a new hiding-place for his treasure. It was nearly nine when his mother opened the door.

"What a strange Sunday!" she said. "Where have you been?" Then, lest her words should seem to imply suspicion or reproach:

"Don't think I'm spying on you, Isaac. La! I know you're in love. But there, I dare say it's only my fancy. She's a sweet little girl, and a good." She set out his supper, carefully kept hot. "Not but what you ought to tell me, Isaac," she added with simple inconsistency. "I'm your mother, and I've a right to be told. Sometimes I think you're afraid to tell me, for fear I should mind or be jealous. Boy, surely you know me better than that!"

"Indeed, mother, there's nothing," he protested, pretending to eat.

She posted herself in front of him, squaring her arms. "So you're not in love?" she said.

He had never lied to her point-blank. "I told you before, I shall never marry," he answered.

She laughed a happy little laugh. "They all say that," she said, "a week or two before the courting.

Very well, Isaac, only mind one thing. Don't let her mother know it's settled before I do!"

"All right!" he answered. "But if I promise that, mother, you must promise me something too."

"All right," said the magpie.

"Well, what is it?" asked the widow, full of tranquil content.

"That you will leave Tom Bunsing alone."

"Leave Tom Bunsing alone!" she repeated, and all the brightness went from her voice. "Do you mean to say not tell Basset that I found him with two pheasants?"

"Yes."

The widow rested her hand on the table. "My own son ask me to cheat our master?" she said.

"No," said Isaac clumsily. "I'll tell them I let him off with a caution. They can't convict him on your story of the pheasants. Mother, I don't want to make him desperate. I'm afraid of him."

"Afraid!" she repeated, with a clear ring of scorn. "Afraid of your rival? Oh! Isaac, it's not that; forgive me, dear. I understand. Nonsense, he won't hurt *me,* Isaac. Why, none of them's ever touched me all these years."

"Let him alone, mother. I'm the keeper. It's my business." The words rang louder than he knew.

"Isaac, you never spoke to me like that before!" Her quick eyes flashed.

"I don't want to speak wrong to you now. It isn't my fault if you meddle——"

"Silence!" She waited. "I am going to bed," she said, and passed out of the room.

III.

In a few days the whole country-side—one solitary soul excepted—had learnt that the good-looking, respectable young keeper—Quint, old widow Quint's son, Isaac Quint—habitually took drink, in large quantities, on the sly. Now, the consumption of strong liquors, though perhaps hardly a thing to be proud of, was not either a subject for general disapproval or even remark; but the secrecy, the hoard, and especially the trick so successfully played on "the hypocrite," all these combined to heap contempt on his head. No one was angrier than Picker, the publican, who, considering himself cheated of legitimate profit, openly expressed his opinion that young Isaac had stolen the liquor he so carefully hid. This presumption the village rejected, but it accepted another, namely, that the keeper, whom nobody had ever seen drunk, must have accustomed himself to intemperance from his boyhood. For weeks, nay, for months, the detected delinquent lived in an atmosphere of angry derision. The long-dreaded discovery had come. He faced it, content, if but, on

returning from his work in the evening, he read the still unchanged welcome upon his mother's face.

If!—*there* hung the daily, hourly suspense which made his life an unbroken terror. At any moment the blow might fall. His thoughts dwelt on it alone in the woods, at work amongst his comrades, whilst receiving orders at daybreak, whilst watching through the silence of the night. Even now perhaps, as he sat laughing at the joke in the loud tavern, the fatal word was being spoken in the cottage. If his mother talked apart with some neighbour he trembled. One evening, in the beginning of his torment, she chuckled suddenly over the little local paper—*Old Gossip* the country people called it. "Why, here's a capital story," she said. And she read aloud, sufficiently altered for printing, the tale of "The Tippler Tricked."

As she finished, he joined in her laugh.

"Ha, ha! very funny!" he said.

She peered over her spectacles. For one second his heart stood still. "Yes," she assented, "and serve him right, says I!"

With the tact which is born only of infinite tenderness, he still studied to avoid betraying *himself*. In common with so many for whom the drink-crav-

ing is a disease, his body neither demanded nor easily developed intoxication. He never came home the worse for liquor, excepting late at night; he was never at any time tipsy in the popular sense. In spite of his constantly chewing tobacco, his mother, of course, occasionally noticed that he had taken a glass of spirits. She had never known a man who did not.

As the weeks went by, and the storms lulled without reaching the hill-top, some measure of tranquillity returned to Isaac's breast. After all, it was a fact of universal experience that evil rumours but rarely encountered the persons immediately concerned. Nobody, except a politician, has the faintest idea what is said of him by his foes or his friends. But for the scene in the tavern, Isaac himself might have doubted the truth. His master had never mentioned the subject. Only, once, the head keeper had bidden him, with a sneer, to look out.

So, Sunday after Sunday, the widow, in her stiffest of garments, walked to church on her tall son's arm. She noticed, indeed, that people stopped and stared after them, but people, especially women, had always done that. She smiled to herself. If

she had met a young fellow like Isaac she also would have stopped and stared.

It was true, as Jan Bost had said, that her neighbours respected her respectability. Strong provocation would be required to do her a cruel and superfluous wrong. The man who most appreciated their forbearance loathed himself for requiring it. He had never yet fought against the curse which oppressed him as he fought during those first weeks while the whole world was mocking him. He must conquer now. For, when the truth crashed down upon her, as it inevitably some day would, and she arose, broken-hearted, to reproach him, then must he be able to answer that his guilt, if not his shame, was a thing of the past. He *must* conquer. For many weeks he fought with the energy of despair. And, despairing, fell.

Then even the last frail hope broke under him, and he let himself sink. There was no longer any reason for hiding his secret from any but his mother. He went openly to buy drink at the village tavern; he stayed to consume it there. It was pleasant to drink in company and forget the horror at his heart. Far better than to pace the woods in the rainy winter nights. And some of the chaps at the tavern were not half bad if you got to know them. The

circumstances of his mother's life had made her too unsociable. What was the use of never quitting the desolate hill, living like a weasel or an owl? Tom Bunsing had capital stories—if he poached, it was from sheer love of danger, a feeling that even a keeper could understand. Isaac had never borne malice; when Tom stepped up to him grinning and said, "Come, I owe you a dram, Quint!" the poor fellow accepted the offer with a laugh that sounded bright.

Meanwhile, the scandal of his intemperate habits having become a patent fact, the neighbourhood ceased to talk. But one Sabbath the minister, gazing down from the pulpit on mother and son, suddenly made up his mind to "take measures." The minister was an old man now, and he still believed himself a wise one.

"Petronella," he said on the Monday at dinner to the maiden sister who lived with him, "Isaac Quint must become a Blue Ribbonite. I shall walk over presently and tell his mother so."

"His mother?" The sister looked up. "His mother? Remember, James, his mother doesn't *know.*"

"Amazing!" said the minister. "Yes, of course, I am aware! She must be very blind."

"Love is blind," replied the little old lady, shaking her corkscrew curls, "in her case. And foreseeing, in his. How he must love her! I cannot help watching them in church."

"Fie!" said the minister. "Not during the sermon, I hope?"

"Could we but help them!" she continued. "Yes, we will go together. It will require a great deal of care."

"You!" exclaimed the minister. "It would certainly upset you! You cannot walk half so far!"

She looked across at him and reflected.

"Yes, I can," she said. "Yes, I can. It is a fine afternoon. Let us go."

A few minutes later they started; the frail little spinster held on bravely along the straight line of road.

The widow was feeding her pigs. Nothing disconcerted, she asked her visitors to sit down while she went to wash her hands.

"I am sure you're dead beat," said the Dominé, anxiously watching his sister.

"No, no," she answered faintly. "What a quiet spot it is! Peace everywhere, even on the woman's face."

"Yes, she must be very lonely. Here she comes. Vrouw Quint, I have called to speak to you on a matter of importance. You have doubtless heard of the Blue Ribbon."

"No, Dominé," replied the widow; "but there's so many advertisements nowadays."

"This isn't an advertisement. It's an association."

"For the Queen's birthday?" said the widow.

"By no means." The Dominé spake with asperity.

"I beg pardon," replied the widow humbly. "I had heard something about a feast on the Queen's birthday. It must have been something else."

"It was," said the Dominé. "The Blue Ribbon is an association for the suppression of drink. But I forgot. You know nothing of the evils caused by intemperance."

"I think I do," replied the widow softly, her mind reverting to that wintry morning when they had brought her husband home.

"H'm!"—the Dominé's sister glanced up at him.

"Oh, yes, of course. We all do. The curse of this country is the drink-devil. Quite true, Widow Quint. I am glad you take so sensible a view of the

matter. You know what is meant by signing the pledge?"

"Promising never to touch a drop of spirits in one's life." The widow suppressed a yawn.

"Just so," said the Dominé, pleased. "It is a cause in which all of us can help. *You* must sign the pledge, Widow Quint!"

"I?" exclaimed the widow indignantly.

"You. As I also have done."

"You? Well, Dominé, I should never have thought it of you; but I suppose it began at college. My cousin in Utrecht do say as the drinking is dreadful at college. But, as for me, I can't think what you mean, Dominé! I never touched spirits in my life!"

She rose, her brown eyes aflame.

"That's the very sort we begin with," said the Dominé sweetly, quite unconscious of any aspersions on himself. "Nine-tenths of our members are young ladies of position who couldn't distinguish madeira from gin. That's the very sort of people we want, Widow Quint, to—to set an example. Now, your son—you must employ all your influence to make Isaac wear the Blue Ribbon."

"Never," said the widow, and sat down again.

The Dominé, who had been watching for his

sister's approval of his diplomacy, turned round with a jump.

"What do you mean, Dominé? I can't think what you mean, sir? I don't know if anyone's been calumniating Isaac: I defy them to their face!"

She suddenly grew calm again. "I beg your pardon," she said. "There must be some mistake. The boy's a well-behaved boy, as nobody knows better than I. And nobody can say that he drinks. Isaac!"

She ruffled her apron; her hands twitched.

"At least you cannot pretend that your son is a teetotaler," protested the Dominé with almost a sneer.

"No, Dominé. Is anybody? I never met anybody that was. He takes his occasional glass of spirits, like all men; and his beer at meal-times, as I do. La! to think of my insulting Isaac by saying he ought to take the pledge!"

"But, dear Vrouw Quint, *I* never get drunk," interposed the Dominé's sister mildly; "yet I also have joined the association. We do so to protest against the habit of drinking!"

"Then that must be a fancy of ladies and gentlemen, miss; and of those I never pretended to know

nothing. All I know is that the Dominé asks me to tell Isaac and the neighbours that I think he's a drunkard. Isaac! Me! La! Dominé, please let's talk of something else. Would you like, miss, to see my little brown pig?"

The Dominé had been moving uneasily on his chair. "There are moments, Petronella," he began, "when we feel that silence would mean participation in guilt. At whatever cost to myself or to others, as pastor of this parish, it is my duty to take a paramount interest in the welfare of the people——"

"Yes, quite true," exclaimed Petronella in great agitation, "and so let us look at the little brown pig."

"Pig? There are no pigs like the human. Vrouw Quint, listen to me! What I am going to reveal to you will cause you great pain. My good woman, I appeal to your courage, your Christian resignation. Your son has doubtless excellent qualities. But he also has faults."

At this moment the Dominé, to hide his perturbation, paused and took snuff. Had he not done so, the widow's fate had been sealed. But the break gave her courage.

"Mejuffrouw, may I speak?" she began timidly,

with her hand to her fluttering breast. "I know that Isaac is not perfect. Ask him if, in his youth, I did not punish him when he misbehaved. I could speak now of his shortcomings, but were that befitting in his mother? Is it necessary that others should point out his vices to me—imaginary or not?" Once more she rose, with a noble gesture of command and appeal.

"Come," she said, "let us go and see the little brown pig?"

"All right," said the magpie, who had listened attentively all through the interview.

"Yes, let us go," assented the old maid in a low voice. "James, she is right; let us leave her and her son to the mercy of God."

"I sometimes fancy, Petronella," replied the minister testily, "you believe that you are wiser than I."

"No, indeed, dear; no, indeed. A great deal less wise. But——"

"But what? Well then, in Heaven's name, let us be going! We've no time for sight-seeing. You'll be ill as it is, Petronella. I never ought to have allowed it. But you make me do whatever you please."

The widow, left alone, ran out for a breath of air. She felt as if she should suffocate; her heart beat against her ribs.

She had gone farther along the road than she knew, when she saw Christine Brodel in a small orchard, at some distance, picking up apples. She called out to her, and skirting the wood, ran across.

In her indignation she poured out the story of the visit. She appealed eagerly for sympathy to the silent figure beside her.

"Why, Christine, you're as taciturn as people say *I* am! Girl, what would you have said if the Dominé had told you that Isaac got drunk?"

The farmer's daughter fingered the apples in her apron. "I should have demanded proof," she replied slowly. "But the Dominé didn't say that—did he now, Vrouw Quint?"

"No, indeed," replied the widow. "Well, perhaps I'm over-sensitive. But to think of it—dear me! to think of it! It gave me such a turn!"

The girl peered into her face. "You aren't well," said Christine, with a warmth in which all her pent-up sympathy bubbled over. "You should see the doctor. You know you aren't well, Vrouw Quint."

"I'm well enough, but my heart isn't as strong as it used to be, and my breath is apt to catch. I wish Isaac were safely married. Girl, when he's not out in the woods at night he's watching your window—the young fool!"

"Did he tell you so?" cried Christine, her rosy cheeks aflame.

"Tell me! No. Trust a mother to find out. Good-bye."

But the girl held her back. "Mother," she said earnestly, "you don't couple our names like that, do you?—please!"

Something in Christine's face struck alarm to the widow's heart: "What do you mean?" she said fiercely. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," answered Christine faintly. "It's all your fancy. Nothing's wrong: nothing's right."

"Pooh, you don't understand about sweethearting! So much the better. *I* know Isaac's in love. But perhaps it's not with you, child! Why should it be? La, la!" And the two women kissed.

Christine, left to her apples, finished the last heap with laggard steps and sad eyes. On her homeward way a few tear-drops stole into undue prominence. She had just dashed one back when, at a turn of the lane, she met Bunsing.

"I was waiting for you," said Tom. "I saw you kiss old Mother Quint! Now, don't look scared. There were two fields between us. See here, you don't mean to say that you stick to that brute of an Isaac?"

"No. How dare you speak to me like that? Let me pass!"

"Don't be silly, Christine. There's as good fish in the sea as ever drank too much of it. You know as well as I that my father 'll be only too glad to have me settle down at the farm. Give a fellow a chance!"

"Let me pass!" she repeated, furiously, "you—— poacher, you!"

He dropped aside with an oath: "Yes, I'm a poacher," he said. "Let your keeper look out!" He slunk away, leaving her in a tremble of diversified feelings. One thing, however, she clearly understood —she could never marry the man she loved.

The widow meanwhile, true to her long-tried precept that work in God's woods was the best cure for worry, had undertaken a survey of the preserve which belonged to her son's especial care. She was longing, yet fearing, to meet him. The events of the morning had left a painful impression upon her.

There had been something in the manner of those she had spoken to which filled her with unreasoned alarm. A vague dread of misfortune hung heavy in the air. She was furiously angry with the Dominé that he should have ventured to annoy her—her, John Quint's widow—with his superfluous talk about drink. Did she not nightly thank God that He had answered her prayers, that Isaac came home with steady step and steadily wished her "Good-night?"

As she hastened on, walking off her irritation, her keen eyes—still so keen at a distance!—caught sight of a half-effaced footstep, which was certainly not Isaac's. She followed the direction in which it pointed. It led her down a slope, among brushwood, to a nearly dry little runnel, close by which, admirably hidden, she found a carefully spread net. Her eyes flashed with triumph. Immediately she began cutting it loose.

"Hillo!" called a voice from the other side. Tom Bunsing rose up among the brushwood. He had come straight from his interview with Christine to look after his net. "You leave that alone, you she-dragon!"

"I'm doing my duty to the Baron," intrepidly re-

plied Widow Quint. "Go home to your poor mother, Tom Bunsing, and dry her tears!" He jumped across without answering. In the scuffle which ensued he soon gained possession of the net, upsetting the old woman on the bank. "I can't help it," he said. "Why do you interfere, you hateful old thing, with what isn't your business? Do get away home."

She picked herself up. "Keep your net," she said scornfully. "I don't need it. I've got the other, just like it; I found it a week ago. All I wanted was full proof they were yours. To-morrow I lay the whole case before the head-keeper. You'll spend the next month or two in jail."

Tom Bunsing's dark face turned pale. He swore a great oath. He had never been caught before. He had never dreamed of imprisonment.

When he spoke again his voice was quite calm. "Look here," he said, "I'll go back with you to your cottage, Vrouw Quint, and you'll hand me over that net."

"I shall not," said the widow, rising to depart.

"Then I shall go and fetch it. Isaac is down at the village, doing some work for the Baron. I knew he was, or I should not have come here."

The widow faced her antagonist with a confident smile. "You won't find the net in the cottage," she said; "for 'tis hidden in the woods."

"In Isaac's oak!" exclaimed Tom.

"What—what do you mean?"

"In Isaac's oak, where he hides his—oh, hang you, Vrouw Quint! Don't you hurt my mother, and I won't hurt your son."

"Hurt my son? How can you hurt Isaac? What does Isaac hide in the oak?"

"Never you mind. Where did you hide my net?"

"Tom Bunsing, I can't—I can't. What do you know of my son?"

"No more than of my net. Look here. I'll give you until nightfall—no, I'll give you until eight o'clock. If by that time the net isn't back in the place that you took it from, then——"

"Well?"

"The worse it will be for you."

"Pooh!"

"And for Isaac."

"Tom Bunsing, what harm can you do Isaac?"

"Till eight o'clock, mind you—not ten minutes later. I won't—do you hear me? I *won't* go to prison—for the sake of the old folks at home, who

wouldn't stand it. Be careful. 'Tis ill fighting with a desperate man." He turned and disappeared into the underwood, without waiting for another word.

Vrouw Quint retraced her steps homewards. She was very anxious and very tired. Something, surely, must be wrong with Isaac. It could not be anything serious. Still, young men were not saints: she had never expected him to prove perfect. Again, she had unpleasant visions of imprudent lovemaking. Or could he, once in a way, have lost money at cards? No, what about the oak? What had he hidden from the others—from her?

As she drew nigh to the cottage, she saw that a figure was standing by the door. Presently she recognised the carrier, John Bost.

"I have a message for you from Isaac," said John. "I promised to take it: I didn't dream you'd be out. Woman, how ill you're looking! Go in and sit down."

"What is it?" she gasped.

"The Baron and Baroness have gone to spend the day at Roodwell with the Baron's brother; they've taken Isaac with them, to see about some pigeons. He'll be back about eight."

This was terrible news to the widow. She sat

thinking, her hands clasped tight on the knobs of her chair. "John Bost, you've got your cart here," she began. "You must drive across to Roodwell with a note from me to Isaac."

"You're a cool 'un!" replied John. "A note! Is it to ask the Baroness to come back with him to supper?" She looked up at him, and his voice fell. "I can do it," he said; "'taint much out of my way. But make haste."

She went to her father's bureau, and laboriously indited the following epistle—

"DEAR ISAAC,

You must speak to the Baron and to Basset immediately. The *thing* must be done at eight o'clock to-night, in the Hillside Woods. I have everything ready. Come home to supper. Come as quick as you can.

"YOUR MOTHER."

She enclosed this in an envelope and gave it to the carrier. Supposing he opened the letter and betrayed her? No, people never did such sort of things outside the newspapers. Besides, she had no choice. "You're an honest man, John," she said, "I know. I'll give you a five-penny bit."

"Hang your five-penny bit," replied John, and walked out of the cottage.

She stood uncertain for a moment, then she ran after him and called him back.

"John, John, listen! Answer me one thing before you go. The Dominé—has he ever asked you to take the Blue Ribbon, John?"

John Bost stared hard into the old woman's face. "Asked me!" he said cheerily. "Dozens of times. Whom doesn't he ask? Why, the Baron wears one —and the Baroness too!"

"No, I've never seen that," objected the widow.

"Well, anyhow, he's made them teetotalers," replied John, a bit disconcerted.

"Thank you! Thank you!" the widow cried fervently. "Never mind me, John. See that Isaac gets my letter. Good day!"

"So it's that," said the carrier to himself, gazing down at the envelope. "Poor old woman, she don't look like living much longer, but, if she does, she's bound to find out."

The widow, back in her armchair, broke into joyful and angry tears—tears that were wrath with herself for the moment's brief doubt of her boy.

He would understand her message, for although

she rarely referred to the subject, he knew that she was preparing with Basset the arrest of Tom Bunsing, as soon as they had proof of his guilt. She admired Isaac's refusal to take any steps against his rival; it was like the nobility of his character. But she must concert measures where he naturally held aloof. The very delicacy of his position made it doubly incumbent on her to do her duty to their master. It was this feeling which had left her no rest. "I won't plot anything extra against Tom," had said Isaac. "If he comes in my way, the worse for him." He added to himself, "and for me."

The evening began to fall, and the widow, having peeled her potatoes, sat waiting for Isaac's return; waiting, wondering what was going to happen, not speculating overmuch, resolved to do her duty to the Baron, whatever might befall. The dog, after unappreciated attempts to push his nose between her fingers, had curled himself to sleep against her skirt. The magpie occasionally annoyed her with his futile "All right!"

Supper-time crept by without bringing Isaac. The cuckoo called the hour of seven and half-past. Then she could bear the suspense no longer. She went out into the dark night, and, exhausted as she was, began walking along the road to meet him. Suddenly

a dumb anxiety increased upon her, the fear of a catastrophe drawing nigh. She felt that she must speak to some human being, hear some human voice. She toiled down to the turnpike by the highroad; she would hear there if anyone had passed.

"Yes," said Katey, "the Baron had driven over to Roodwell, in the brougham, with Isaac on the box, beside the coachman. The Baron would be coming back presently; they never were late. But Isaac had returned on foot—why, a couple of hours ago! He had struck off into the woods; had he not yet been home?"

"The woods!" repeated the widow. "Katey, had he his gun?"

"No, he had not," replied the turnpike woman. I particularly noticed that. For I said to myself, he ought to take his gun of nights. Don't we all know Tom Bunsing has said that he'd do for him."

"Tom Bunsing do for him!" repeated the widow.

"Yes, neighbour, and I don't hold with those that think you ought to know nothing about your son's doings, nothing at all! Some things there may be—but there——"

"What things?" cried the widow. "There can be none."

"There, there! But surely you know Isaac and Bunsing are both sweet on Christine?"

"I know nothing for certain of either."

"Well, well! Tom's a desperate character, and I say that Isaac had better be careful."

"Nonsense," said the widow; "he's gone up into the woods to meet Basset."

"That he hasn't, for Basset went by with two wagons of faggots, ten minutes ago—to the village."

The widow clutched at her breast. All further doubt was impossible. Between Isaac and Tom Bunsing there existed some secret link of shame. Instead of obeying his mother's message, the keeper had gone up alone, to warn the poacher or to defy him. Even now, perhaps, they were contending in the darkness of the forest, her son and the man she had threatened. "Don't drive me desperate, I too have a mother. Don't drive me desperate," Tom Bunsing had said.

"How late is it?" she asked wildly.

"Near eight o'clock."

"No, no, your clock's always much too slow. 'Tis more like a quarter past!"

"Well," said the turnpike woman apologetically,

"the clock certainly ain't particular about a few minutes here nor there. Still, I don't think——"

From the far dark of the woodlands a faint report of firearms rang out clear across the night.

"Hark, what's that?" exclaimed Katey.

But the widow was running along towards the spot where the hill road branched off from the highway. "Isaac! Isaac!" she cried stupidly—"Isaac!"

She stood still, panting: her leaden limbs refused to carry her farther; a great sickness and oppression weighed upon her chest. "Isaac!"—the wide expanse of her beloved woods stretched merciless before her, away into the blackness of the silent winter evening; with a terrible distinctness she saw him lying motionless, stretched on the turf beneath the ghastly grimness of the trees.

As she stood gazing, helplessly, the high horizon seemed to lighten: in another moment a paleness spread across it, then, slowly, a pink and purple glow. The woods above the cottage, near the hill-top, were on fire.

Still she stood gazing, helplessly. The conflagration increased with solemn, far-away stateliness, gradually spreading and filling the east. Now, doubtless, the cottage was burning—the animals! What had happened? What had happened to her son?

She sank on her knees. "Oh God!" she screamed —"Oh God! Oh God!"

A carriage was coming along the highroad at a furious pace. She lifted herself up. The Baron, hurrying home. For an instant the thought flashed across her dizzy brain that blind old Katey might possibly have been mistaken! Perhaps she should see Isaac sitting safe beside the coachman! "Stop," she cried, running to meet the horses—" stop!"

The coachman, alone on the box, drew up with a pull. Amidst the clatter of the horses and the harness, the Baron's voice was heard at the window. "Oh, Mynheer the Baron! — the forest — Isaac — Isaac — the cottage——" was all that the widow could articulate.

"How? Isaac?" exclaimed the Baroness. The Baron opened the carriage door. "Come in here, Widow Quint," he said; "there is room on the little seat. Quick, we've no time to lose. We are hastening to the village for help!"

As the carriage flew on through the darkness, the widow, growing gradually somewhat calmer, found breath enough to gasp out her suspicions and her fears. In broken accents she told of Tom Bunsing's misconduct and his threats. "And if harm has be-

fallen Isaac—as surely it has—the fault, Mynheer the Baron, is mine!"

She burst out weeping. The old couple had listened in anxious sympathy.

"Yes, weep," said the Baroness, gently, taking the widow's hand.

"Fault?" repeated the old man. "Nay, that is not the word. You have acted nobly, in accordance with your whole righteous life." Both of them silently admitted that her fear was well-founded. It would not be the first time, nor the second, that woods had been fired to conceal a poacher's crime.

The Baron sighed. "Nothing is certain yet," he said. "Isaac has always been an admirable son to you; no wonder you are anxious about him. But he is probably alive and well!"

"Oh, Mynheer—oh, Mevrouw, he is all in all to me," said the widow. "Since the day of his birth he has been my daily glory! Never mother had a nobler son!"

"Well, we shall know in another minute," said the Baron.

The carriage was rattling along the village street. The street was full of hurry and voices. Suddenly the horses stopped.

"There is Basset," cried the Baron. "Hi! Basset —how about Isaac Quint? Is he safe?"

"Safe enough!" came the keeper's excited reply. "No fear of his being up in the woods, Mynheer the Baron! The drunken sot's here in the tavern—too drunk to move!"

With a shriek which rang over the rumbling of the fire-engine, the widow sprang out of the shelter of the carriage.

"Mynheer the Baron, he lies—he lies!" she cried, and ran into the public house. The others followed her.

On a bench, up against the wall, sat Isaac, staring stupidly, trying to collect his senses. Half a dozen other men, including Tom Bunsing, were gathered beside him, near a table covered with glasses.

At sight of his mother, sick and distraught, the young keeper's eyes seemed to clear, and he steadied himself against the whitewashed wall.

"Merciful God! what has happened?" cried the widow.

Isaac did not answer. He was trying to remember. When his mother's message had reached him, he had asked the Baron's immediate permission to depart, but, instead of consulting with the head-keeper, he had hurried to the woods to look for Bunsing and secure

his silence. He had found the poacher there, and had learned his ultimatum: restitution of the net before eight o'clock, or betrayal of the secret to the widow. In vain Isaac had pleaded his powerlessness; Tom Bunsing, equally desperate, had answered with the information, strangely new to the sufferer's son, that Vrouw Quint had acknowledged a heart complaint to Katey, who had whispered the news to Vrouw Brodel at the farm. "And a sudden shock may kill her," said Tom Bunsing knowingly. Isaac, conscious that any appeal to his mother would prove worse than useless, had broken down utterly, had implored the other to delay at least until the morning, had finally rushed away, through brake and brushwood, to end his miseries at the tavern in drink. Tom Bunsing, left alone near the spot where he knew the evidence of his guilt must lie hidden, had set fire to a pile of dry twigs which lay dangerously near to his hand. Then he too had fled, emptying his pouch that no cartridges might be found upon him—hence the report—had fled across country to the tavern, where all men would see him. This warning was enough for him; he would never poach again.

"I'm all right—all right," said Isaac.

"Isaac, how came you drunk?" faltered his mother.

"Why didn't you warn Basset? Why is Tom Bunsing here? Don't you know the woods are on fire?"

"The woods on fire!" cried Isaac, starting up and reeling. "So they were saying. I thought they were joking!" He turned, searching for someone. "Here, Bunsing, *you* did that!"

"Yes, *you* did that!" echoed the widow, gasping, and sinking back. Strong arms seized her, and drew her into a chair. "Mynheer the Baron, he did it! Tom Bunsing—the poacher!"

"Did I?" exclaimed Tom, "or did Isaac Quint, the drunken keeper?—Isaac Quint, who gets drunk in the woods every night, and keeps bottles of spirits in the hollow trees up yonder?—Quint, the drunkenest drunkard in the village, as everybody standing here knows, except his old fool of a mother!"

"Silence!" said the Baron in a terrible voice.

The widow stared up at the faces around her, and read acquiescence in them all. The vague dangers and threatenings which all day had muttered around her condensed into definite shape. A look came into her eyes, as they looked on her son, which none that saw it has ever forgotten. Her head bent; she fell forward in a heap on the floor.

They lifted her immediately, and the doctor, coming to the front—for the whole village was assembled

in or near the tavern—tried to do what little could be done. With a cry whose echo seemed unending in the silence, Isaac had sunk upon his knees beside the body.

The police were in the room, putting back the crowd. Outside, the rustic firemen were continuing their futile preparations. The distant heaven was ablaze with light.

The doctor desisted, with a shrug of the shoulders.

"Arrest these two men," said the police-inspector softly.

Isaac held out both arms to the handcuffs, and over the set anguish of his face swept a gleam that was almost of hope.

THE SUMMER CHRISTMAS.

THE SUMMER CHRISTMAS.

It is an old story, forgotten long ago, I think, in that quiet corner of the world which saw it happen. A touching story it has always seemed to me, and strangely quaint; but that, perhaps, may only be because to me its memory remains indissolubly blended with recollections of the place in which I used to hear it told me, because the soft voice of the teller must ever be to me the music of the tale. For me alone is this: why should I seek, then, to intrude it upon others? To them it will be a passing incident, printed, paid for (a tenth part of a sixpence), sliced between two others, yawned over for five minutes, and forgot. But to me it is the changeless Noel, the young anthem of the angels around the cradle of the Saviour of the world. And again I hear my mother speaking, in the wainscot chamber with the painted panels, in the half light of the fire-logs and her face, hear her telling, with a voice like distant church-

bells, all the story, how it happened, with but little alteration, many winter evenings, almost word for word. The voice is stilled. The winter evenings were long and cold and dark. They are longer now.

I said the story is an old one. That must be true. For one thing, there are no Counts Edelstam in Holland now; the family has died out, and the simple customs among which they lived are also dead or dying. All this I know. Yet to me the story is so fresh and new it might occur to-morrow. The oldest thing in a man's life (and they say it is the last) is the memory of his mother—daughters may forget: however that be, thank God! to this eternal soul—a-flutter round the flame betwixt two shadows—come some few thoughts that remain untinged by time.

* * * * *

It was on a winter evening that Magda von Malitz arrived at Stamsel—a bitter winter evening, cold and dark as this. The old Count had been expecting her since sunset. The carriage, sent to meet her at the post-house, should have brought her back three hours ago. He sat in the wainscot chamber, where the painted panels are, wondering if some accident could possibly have befallen the horses. The suggestion troubled him. He rang for Peter.

"Peter, do you think that anything can have happened to—the young Baroness?"

"I do not think so, Mynheer the Count."

"And why not, pray?" asked the old gentleman testily.

"Oh! if you wish it, of course, Mynheer the Count."

Count Edelstam took snuff. He used to be a long time about taking snuff.

"Travelling is not so dangerous——" began the old servant, who never spoke unless spoken to, except when he thought he had gone too far.

"*What?*" His master stopped, amazed, with uplifted pinch.

"As it used to be, I was going to say."

"That is true. Now, when I went to Paris"—the old gentleman snuffed, shook his head and waited—"yet that was before the Revolution!" He presented his mull to the servant, a thing he never did by daylight.

"Your Nobleness could not go now," said Peter.

"Peter, you presume. Mind your own business," replied the Count with vivacity. For that subject was a sore one, as will readily appear.

"Still I wish she had arrived," said the Count.

"So she has," said the servant.

"What on earth do you mean?" said the Count.

"I hear the carriage in the courtyard," said the servant.

"Then why the devil can't you speak?" said the Count.

"I did not wish to presume," said the servant.

"You are the curse of my life," exclaimed the Count, running out into the hall.

"And its blessing," said, preparing to follow, the servant.

Magda von Malitz was being ushered up the marble steps from the great doorway. She was very young, with a lot of fair hair, and big blue eyes. She must have looked charming under her travelling-hood.

She dropped a deep curtsey to the stately old gentleman, her uncle, in the cloud of white hair (was it powdered?) and splendid lace ruff. He took her by the hand with a few words of greeting, and led her into the parlour.

"You are like your mother," he said, lifting the lamp-shade to gaze at her. "Why did she go all the way to Austria? It is too far."

"The foot goes where the heart leads it, my uncle," said Magda, and dropped another curtsey.

"Tut, tut. Well, she died there; it is seven years ago."

"Eight years, my uncle," said Magda.

"Tut, tut. You mustn't contradict me. Nobody contradicts me here."

Magda dropped another deep curtsey. There must lie little satisfaction, she reflected, in pretending to be right. But she only said—

"And where is my Uncle Robert, Uncle Charles?"

"Your Uncle Robert is away," replied Uncle Charles. And he coughed a great deal, and cleared his throat, and choked.

"Away?"

"And why not, pray?" said the old gentleman sharply.

"My mother has told me you always lived together, that was all," she answered, with eyes full of innocent surprise; "six months here at Stamsel, six months at Bardwyk, four miles off."

"It is four and a half," said Count Edelstam.

"And she had never known you two days apart. I have often heard her say that. When, please, is he coming back?"

"You ask too many questions, my niece," replied the Count. "You are a stranger here. You could ask questions for ever. My housekeeper will show you to your apartment. After that, pray come down and have some supper."

"Forgive me," she said, "I hardly feel myself a stranger. I used to hear about you and Uncle Robert every day while mother was alive."

He solemnly kissed her on the forehead.

"You will be happy here, I trust," he said. "We will do everything to make you happy. It is a quiet place, but so is Bardwyk; and neither of them is quieter than your convent of Plauensee."

"I am happy to be rid of school. I am happy to be here," said Magda, departing under care of Vrouw Slomp.

The old Count turned abruptly to his servant. "Now that is very strange, is it not?" he said, "that she should begin by asking after Robert."

"Not so very strange, if your Nobleness comes to consider. Evidently the young lady knows more of what happened before than of what has occurred in the last six years."

"Well, go and live with my brother Robert," replied Count Charles inconsequently.

"As your Nobleness pleases. Shall I send you my brother Paul?"

The one old man looked in the other's imperturbable face. Then they both had snuff; and while they were enjoying it, Magda came back. Her hair was all about her brow in curls and ringlets; her dark frock, high-waisted, after the fashion of the period, suited the trimness of her graceful figure. She was all dimples and sweetness and smiles.

"Now to prove that I am no stranger," she said gaily, "I will tell you about that snuff-box, Uncle Charles, which you have got in your hand. It has a stag chased on top of it, silver-gilt, with two rubies for eyes."

"Dear, dear, it is time you came home," he said, laughing. "Yet, my dear, you were never in the Netherlands before."

"Still, they are home," she answered gravely. "I never knew my Austrian father: my mother has been dead so long. Brabant has always seemed my fatherland; mother wished me to think so. She never tired of telling me about her life before her marriage. Uncle Charles, I was so sorry you could not have me a month earlier, before Christmas. I should have liked, above all things, to be present at the 'Peace-

making.' I had been looking forward to it. Of course my Uncle Robert was here for that?"

"My dear, I must go and wash my hands for supper," said Uncle Charles, and he hastily beat a retreat. From one of the panel-chamber's many gloomy corners old Peter came forward into the shaded light.

"Young Freule," he said, "you will excuse me, but the name of your Uncle Robert is never mentioned in this house."

"Why, Peter," cried the girl, "whatever do you mean? And where is Paul?"

"Paul, an 't please your Nobleness, has gone with Count Robert to Bardwyk; they live there always now. Six years ago our masters quarrelled: they have never met or spoken since."

"Quarrelled?"

"It came on about a journey—quite unexpectedly, as one may say. They had always been the best of friends, though very different characters. My master is quick and kind-hearted. Count Robert is slow—but la! he's kind-hearted too."

"I know," said the girl impatiently; "but the quarrel! What quarrel?"

Old Peter peered out of his little grey eyes. "Your Nobleness knows a deal," he said. "They'd been

planning their journey for months, but they always squabbled over it. Count Robert, he wanted to go to Paris; he'd never been out of the country at all. Count Karel had been, as a young man, with me, thirty-nine years ago come next June, and he wouldn't go again, for the one place he'd been to was Paris. La! what a time we had in Paris! It was just before the outbreak of the great Revolution; 'tis a wonder I'm here to tell the tale!" That was Peter's stereotyped expression at this stage of his story. You were now expected to request further details.

"They quarrelled!" said the Freule, speaking as in a dream.

Peter knit his bushy eyebrows. "After what we had gone through, I cannot be surprised at my master's decision," he said.

"But there was no revolution six years ago in Paris! Revolutions are done."

"There might have been," said Peter emphatically; "any time. The people that did what the French did in '89—do you know what they did to the Dauphin?"

"Yes," said the girl softly.

"Dear, dear, they shouldn't teach young ladies such things. And to thousands of innocent women!

No wonder Count Karel will never go to Paris again. No, *he* wanted to visit London! Count Robert refused to hear of London, because the English have taken the Cape of Good Hope."

"That, also, I can understand," remarked Magda.

"They had frequently quarrelled about the matter, amicably, as we fancied, but one evening, suddenly, they grew violent. They were rude to each other." Old Peter's voice dropped to a whisper. "Words fell between them—in fact, in the presence of us servants, they called each other names. I should not tell you, but that it is necessary you should understand. It is not the quarrel, it is *that* which one cannot forgive the other. Each refused to apologise; both were in fault. Count Robert left for Bardwyk that night with my brother. There has been no communication between the two houses since.

"But the Peace-making!" cried Magda, the tears in her eyes. "Surely they must meet at the Peace-making!"

"Hush! I hear my master's step! Neither has been present at the Peace-making, Freule, since the Christmas before the quarrel!"

At this juncture Count Karel entered, and, offer-

ing his hand, led Magda to the supper-table. The soft light of the candles fell from massive candlesticks: there were glittering glass and snowy napery and simple fare. They ate almost in silence, with formal question and answer about the journey. It was only when the oranges and walnuts were put on the table that Count Karel said what he wanted to say.

"It has been arranged," he began, looking down on the crackers he was carefully adjusting, "that you will spend six months of the year with me and six at Bardwyk. I shall ask you to leave for Bardwyk on the 31st of June. Meanwhile, please let us avoid the subject."

She laid her head upon the table-cloth and sobbed.

"Don't," said Count Karel; his voice trembled.

"I—I can't help it. Please forgive me. It is so different from the home-coming I had expected."

"You cannot miss anything. You had never seen either of us, Magda!"

"I—I know. But I have loved you both ever since I can remember. Mother taught me to. And she said your love for each other was the blessing of the neighbourhood. It had taught you to institute the Peace-making——"

"Silence!" said Count Karel in a voice of thunder. Its tones rang through the lonely house. Old Peter crept up anxiously and peeped through the door.

That was the end of Magda's first evening at Stamsel. Many days and evenings followed—cold, quiet, comfortable, uniformly dull. At least they got dull when she realised their uniformity. A silence hung over the house—a beautiful old house, full of art-treasures, many of the present lord's collecting. Everything was in absolute order under Peter's most absolute rule. The housekeeper was a nonentity. Magda was a guest. In the clockwork machinery of the house no hitches occurred, except such as the master occasionally provoked. Count Karel's temper was quick. He believed in, although he detested, scolding. He even scolded Peter. Peter ruled him with a rod of iron.

"The house is silent," said Magda ruefully. She obtained, by not asking for it, permission to drive over to Bardwyk from time to time. The latter was a smaller edifice, a tiny castle, still more valuably furnished, not with art-curios, but with beautiful sixteenth-century furniture in its original place. Nothing much lay between the two properties but a stretch of bleak Brabant country, dotted over with stunted trees.

Connected with each place was a ragged village: here and there a stray house lay lost. Half-way stood the church, in almost desolate loneliness, with the dwelling-house of the priest.

And so Magda got to know her Uncle Robert. He very much resembled his elder brother, but in a quieter way: there was not the eagle flash of the eye: there was a stronger, squarer chin. Count Robert was a bookworm, perfectly content among county histories, local and provincial and familial chronicles, oddities and quiddities, notes and queries, intellectual parings and fringes, and rubbish of every sort. He liked his niece to sit by him, working tapestry. "But I miss my billiards!" he exclaimed one day, suddenly, looking up from van Leeuwen's *Batavia Illustrata*. She did not ask him to explain the "but," or the aggressive denial in his tone. "Do you play billiards, Magda?"

"No, Uncle Robert: they did not teach us in the convent," replied Magda demurely, bending over her work.

"My dear, they were very right. When you come here you must learn to play at billiards, and also at backgammon."

"Uncle Charles and I play backgammon of evenings," said Magda. "He plays beautifully."

"H'm—but not with proper caution. Backgammon, of all games, requires caution."

"Does it?"

"I shall prove to you that it does when we play together. My dear, it wants a long time till the 31st of June."

"This is the 17th of April," was Magda's only answer.

His pride prevented his asking her whether she looked forward to the transmigration, yet he would have given a good deal to know.

"It is time for me to go home," said Magda. That final word invariably annoyed him. But he quietly rang the bell and asked for the Freule's carriage.

Old Paul stood in the doorway, a stouter replica of Peter, with a redder nose and whiter hair.

"An't please your Nobleness," said Paul, "Thys cannot drive the Freule back to-night." Thys was the Stamsel coachman.

"It does not please my Nobleness at all," replied Count Robert. "Pray, what is the matter with Thys?"

"Thys has been suddenly taken ill," said Paul, with a grin and a side glance towards the Freule.

"Drunk, of course," said the Count with quiet triumph.

"An't please your Nobleness, no," said Paul, with still greater satisfaction.

"Then what *is* the matter? Out with it!"

"I hardly like to tell before the Freule," said Paul, with beaming face and fidgety feet. "I am not at all sure that the Freule will approve. But to speak the truth, Mynheer the Count, there's been a fight between Thys of Stamsel and one of our Bardwyk men, and Thys has been beaten all to pieces."

"Which of our men?" asked old Count Robert, buried in *Batavia Illustrata.*

"Red-headed Joris, the stable-boy."

"The rogue ought to be ashamed of himself." Count Robert's head suddenly emerged from the book. "You will not give him a gold piece, Paul; do you hear? I will not have it."

Magda had risen. "No one need ask what the quarrel was about," she said sadly.

"My dear, it is only natural that servants should stick up for their masters."

"And the masters?" She looked him full in the face. His eyes fell. "I can drive myself home to-night," she said. "But I very much fear this will prevent my ever coming again."

Her uncle followed her. "You can have a boy from here," he said. "Magda, listen. You are right.

Tell your uncle that I much regret this incident, and that Thys (whom I have always liked, but that is neither here nor there) shall have every care and comfort. Nothing more, child—do you hear? and nothing less. Good night!"

She drove back with an exultant Bardwyk boy behind her. Her heart, by nature light, was very heavy. At the pastorage-house, half-way, she paused, and going in, sat down by the old priest's side.

"You love them as much as I," she said.

"Boy and man," replied the old priest meekly "I have known them fifty years."

"How long ago is it, reverend father, that they instituted the 'Peace-making?' Tell me all about it; you have never told me before."

"Child, I think I have told you everything. It was twenty years ago, when your mother, who was so much younger than they, married and went to live in Austria. Your mother, as you know, did not marry early; she had long kept house for them. When she was gone, they said—and I think they were right—there seemed to be many more fights and squabbles among the people. We Brabanders are always a quarrelsome race, at Kermesses and feasts and funerals, and we love a law contention or a long-drawn family feud. Your mother—God rest her gentle presence—

had somehow been a Messenger of Peace. She would go into the cottages and bid the men—and the women!—shake hands. Then, when she was gone, and the fights and contentions grew continuous, your uncle and myself—yes, my dear, I had a share in it [he smiled]—we started the Christmas Peace-making. Once a year, at the Holy Feast of Peace and Goodwill, after the Midnight Mass of the Nativity, we hold a little special service, full of 'Blessed are the Peacemakers,' and we sing the Angels' Song. It is very short and simple. The Bishop gladly gave permission. And then, ere it is over, they who will shake hands before the altar: some I call by name; with many I have spoken previously; with some I reason, even on the altar-steps. Ah, my dear, it used to be a beautiful service"—the old man sighed heavily—"shedding an especial glory over our Christmastide."

"But it still takes place!"

Father Cordes sighed again. "It still takes place. What will you have? The manorial pew stands empty on that day. On all other occasions Count Robert goes to a strange church, across the moor! The whole countryside knows of the quarrel. The influence of your uncles is gone. On more than one occasion in former years Count Karel, rising in his seat, has *commanded* some resolute wrong-doer to

make atonement. And now? Let quarrel who quarrel will. Their masters hate each other. Fathful Thys of Stamsel lies at Bardwyk with a broken head." Tears came into the old priest's voice.

"I have done what I could," he said presently; "I have reasoned, I have pleaded. God alone can touch hearts. I am growing very feeble. Freule, my earthly pilgrimage is nearly over. I often feel that I could die in peace if I could see my masters reconciled."

"You will see them reconciled," said Magda suddenly.

"God grant it." She rose.

"Ask him. Ask Him often," she said.

"I have asked Him every day."

"Then how can it not happen? But ask that it may happen now, dear father, before another Christmas comes."

"It must, if I am to see it—on earth," said the father thoughtfully.

She left him without another word, for she could not have spoken it.

Count Karel was fortunately inclined to take a favourable view of the affray. His natural sweetness came to his assistance, for he was one of those people who are permanently sorry they have taken offence.

So he waited till the assurance that his coachman's injuries were anything but dangerous (and honestly earned), and then he even went so far as to smile. "Give the boy from Bardwyk a pot of beer," he said to Peter, "and see that he has some food before he goes back." He turned in the doorway. "What boy is it?" he added.

"One of Kotter's, the gamekeeper's, Mynheer the Count."

"Well, that's a good litter. I'm glad Count Robert has taken him on. But, my dear Magda, I should say you had better give up going across for the present."

"In all things, dear uncle, I shall do as you think fit."

It took Robert three weeks to write and ask if his niece might pay him another visit. He would not apply direct to her, that being contrary to his ideas of etiquette; so at last he sent a note: "Count Robert presents his compliments to Count Karel," his logical mind forbidding him to use the phrase "Dear Brother." When she came, "I have missed you *very* much," he said, and sat and read his folio for the rest of the afternoon.

Driving along the untidy road, between the scraggy poplars, she came across the doctor; and she stopped

to inquire after Father Cordes, who seemed more feeble than ever of late.

"What will you have?" said the doctor coolly. "The man is nearly eighty. He will live through the summer, I should say; but in any case the autumn damps will kill him."

"That is very sad," remarked the Freule.

"Sad? If you saw what I see in one day, young lady, you would alter your ideas of grief."

"I was thinking of something else," replied the girl, to the doctor's annoyance, and she drove on through the mild May dampness, with grey thoughts in the gathering grey.

"Your uncle is well, I presume?" said Count Karel, when they met at the five-o'clock dinner.

"He had a cold."

"He was always subject to colds. He does not pay proper attention to draughts. I merely inquire because, unless his health is equal to the exertion, you could not go to stay with him, dear Magda, in June."

"Do you find me very exhausting?" inquired Magda with a smile.

"I? Far from it. But a guest in a little household like Robert's must cause considerable commotion. Peter manages everything admirably: I should

hardly have the same confidence in Paul. And Robert is a bookworm. My dear, if I thought you would not be quite comfortable there, I should not allow you to go." He looked across anxiously: this reflection had frequently been troubling him of late.

"Dear uncle, let us go there together," she said, trembling. He did not answer at all, but in the middle of dinner, in his nervousness, took snuff.

"I met the doctor," she began presently, unable to bear the silence any longer. "He says that Father Cordes cannot live through the autumn."

"Doctors always say that," replied Count Karel incontinently. But his mouth twitched.

"He certainly is very old and feeble."

"I shall go and see him to-morrow, and tell him about my vinery. I am in hopes he will have, this year again, a bunch of grapes on the longest day." Count Karel spoke with unconcealed vainglorious-ness; in those days that was a great achievement. Count Karel loved his green-house.

Next morning he went and told the priest, and the old man answered: "Count Karel, I thank you kindly. But oh, 'tis a branch of olive you should bring me first of all." The Lord of the Manor walked home in a rage, but several days elapsed before he remarked to Magda: "Yes, undoubtedly, Father Cordes

is not very well just now. It is probably a passing indisposition."

"Poor, dear old man," said Magda.

"He is not so very old. He is not yet eighty." A long pause. "True, you are eighteen."

"Uncle, supposing the doctor were right? Supposing the father were not to get better." Magda stood looking out of the window. "Supposing he were to meet my mother, and—and—uncle, my mother never *knew*."

"How dare you?" exclaimed Count Karel, and walked out of the room.

"You are right in so far," said Count Robert two days later. "I have much respect for your judgment, Magda; for a woman's it is singularly sound. My brother has never sufficiently considered the importance of even your least significant actions, with an eye to the peasantry around. It is a mistake I have often pointed out to him, when we were—in the habit of conversing. Now this subject you have occasionally referred to, of our living together or separately—in itself it is a matter of slight signification (we have two houses)—but it has its exceedingly objectionable side."

"I am so glad to hear you say that, dear uncle," said Magda fervently.

The old man blinked his eyes. "I am alluding," he explained hastily, "to the Christmas Peace-making. Viewed with an eye to the Peace-making, it is illogical, absurd. I have often thought that. It is absurd. Now supposing I was present, by accident, at the Peace-making, from a simple consciousness of absurdity, I should have to get up and take Karel's hand."

"You would forgive?" she panted.

"My dear, you are not as reasonable as I expected. No. Before my servant my brother called me 'an idiot.' To accept that epithet would be to render my position untenable."

"Paul! He is deaf. I am sure he never heard it. Have you asked him?"

"It is not a subject one discusses with one's servant," said Count Robert stiffly.

She came up to him with an arch imperiousness and rang the little hand-bell by his side.

"My dear, you forget yourself!"

"Trust me," she said pleadingly, "not to do that."

And when Paul came in—"Paul," she began, "I think you have omitted——"

"I beg your pardon, Freule," interposed the old servant promptly. "I can't hear what you say."

"To do something I asked you the other day," shouted the Freule.

"I never heard you. I'm getting deafer. But I was always deaf. What was it, Freule?"

"Paul," interrupted Count Robert suddenly. "The last time I conversed with my brother, did you happen to hear what passed?"

Magda cast the old servant, who adored her, a quick glance of intelligence.

"Not a word, Mynheer the Count," said Paul. "How could I? Why, that's but six years ago. I was quite as deaf then as now."

"You may go," said Count Robert calmly. "My dear, I was under the impression that we shouted. I am glad we spoke like gentlemen. Perhaps it was not as much of a quarrel as we thought. Still, he was very rude to me. I can never forgive him. But I admit that the Christmas Peace-making has become ridiculous. I miss my billiards, Magda; I hope you will develop an aptitude for the game. It is a logical game. I wish July was here; I am looking forward to your coming."

Magda went back to her Uncle Charles. She found him in a state of exultation. He had just secured, by chance, from an itinerant pedlar, a rare piece of genuine old Delft. He lingered in front of his show-

cases, and she observed that he especially attracted her attention to the acquisitions of the last half-dozen years. "It is a pity," he said, more to himself. "Robert was a very fair judge of a curio. Now you, Magda, you do your best, dear; you do your very best."

"Uncle Karel," said Magda, "in a few weeks I shall be going to Bardwyk for good."

"Till the 31st of December," corrected the Count, with annoyance. "I cannot help it. I am exceedingly vexed. I shall miss you most dreadfully. Do not agitate me, Magda. I am the elder; you cannot expect me to take the first step."

"The second?" begged the girl, with her arm round his neck.

"Nor the second. He called me an idiot before my servant. Me, the head of the family—no man would stand that."

"But, dear, uncle," said Magda, half laughing. "You called him an idiot too!"

"In the *second* place, Magda, I called him an idiot, most certainly. I was right. He was an idiot. As far as that goes, we were both idiots."

"In that case, dear uncle, you, with your natural perspicacity—forgive your little niece; Uncle Robert is so deliberate, so logical, but he is very much

slower in coming to a conclusion than you — you, with your quickness, your keenness of perception, I am sure you would have realised the situation, would have expressed your opinion of it, much sooner than he."

"Dear me, there is something in that!" said Count Charles. "You think I must have been the first to discover he was an idiot?"

"I am sure of it," replied Magda demurely, and kissed her uncle's hand.

Count Charles took a few steps up the drawing-room and down again. "In any case I refuse to consider the matter before Christmas," he said. "I refuse absolutely; do you understand? It would be unfair to your Uncle Robert, who has a right to your six months alone with him. It would be *mean.* I do not think I have ever done a mean thing. He would say that was my motive. I refuse absolutely. You will particularly oblige me by not mentioning the subject again."

"You will particularly oblige me," said Uncle Robert, next week, "by not mentioning the subject again. I should have no objection to a satisfactory settlement with Charles *pro formâ,* though I cannot forget that he erroneously mistook me for an idiot. But I have always resolved that any such form of

reconciliation should take place exclusively at Christmastide, at the Peace-making. That ceremony I consider the only *raison d'être* of a truce. Our example, I understand, has had the most disastrous effects. The whole neighbourhood is in a more lawless and quarrelsome condition than it ever was before. And no wonder. Logic, after all, rules the world, though short-sighted philosophers deny it. The Peace-making has gone to ruin. There are families that have quarrelled for years. But for us to restore it, personally, as we could do, for ever, would be humiliating in the extreme. Of late, my dear, I have thought it all out. We have no further choice; we must either remain absurd or become contemptible. I should not object to the Peace-making; but it is for ever impossible. Take a book."

Magda went and told the priest, and they wept together. "In no case shall I see their reunion!" sighed Father Cordes. "My days on earth are numbered, I cannot live two months."

"I can do no more. I give it up," said Magda, weeping. "Let us speak of other things. There is one thing I have long been wanting to ask you to do for me, father. On the 17th of June is the anniversary of my mother's death. I want you to let us read a Mass for her and to hold a short commemora-

tion service in this church of yours she loved so well."

"I will come myself," said the old man, trembling.

It was during the following night, in a dream, that the great thought came to Magda. Eagerly she went across to Bardwyk, and begged of Count Robert to come. "I loved her dearly," said Count Robert; "I cannot reasonably refuse to be present. Magda, you are a good girl, I would not hurt your feelings. However, I shall not sit in our chairs: you must see I have a seat on the opposite side of the chancel."

Magda stopped at the Pastorage, and held a long confabulation with the father. He blessed her at parting, his hand on her sunny young head.

"Your Uncle Robert coming?" said Uncle Charles. "Well, that shall not keep me from being present. We want such a peace-maker here as your mother, my dear. The long feud between two families at Bardwyk ended yesterday, Peter tells me, in a murder."

"God forgive the guilty," said Magda under her breath.

He glanced across at her quickly. "The Father is failing fast," she said.

"He will outlive Robert and me," replied Count Edelstam testily; "but young people always think the old are going to die."

"He will never conduct another Christmas Peace-making," said Magda.

"We shall see when Christmas comes," replied the Count defiantly.

"When Christmas comes," repeated Magda, and she looked away into the pale blue sky. "When Christmas comes."

"You are pledged to reticence," said the Count meaningly, "till Christmas comes."

"Yes," answered Magda, "Christmas."

"When does Christmas come?" she suddenly exclaimed—"Whenever the Lord Christ, surely, is born into human hearts. Christmas! it is the Lord Christ's coming! It is his message of peace and his birth of goodwill!" She passed out into the summer night.

For the ensuing weeks she was busy in the little village church. She renovated it entirely with deft fingers, preparing its ornamentation as if for a festival. When the day approached, its altars shone bright with fresh gilding, new embroideries, a profusion of flowers. All the last afternoon she worked hard, admitting no one. Only Father Cordes lent her assistance. It had

been her especial desire that the service should be held at the same solemn hour as the midnight Mass of Christmas Eve. She had conquered her uncles' opposition. "It was the time of my mother's death," she reminded them.

And thus, when the hour was come, the peasants, for miles around, crept through the balmy stillness of a soft midsummer midnight to the blazing portal of the little church. In his stall by the high altar, robed and shrouded, white with approaching dissolution, sat the hoary parish priest they had all known all their lives. And, opposite each other, on both sides of the chancel, gazing neither right nor left, but at each other, sat the two Lords of the Manor, the old Counts Edelstam. Between them knelt my mother, thinking of *her* mother, praying as the pure and loving pray for the pure and good. The humble little church was a splendour of lights and roses—white roses, the symbol of peace and of innocent grief. And lo! before the altar, in the place where all were accustomed to see it each December, was the presentment of the holy Nativity in the manger, the worship of the shepherds and the princes, the song of the angels, the evangel of Peace.

There was nothing unusual in the service—the Mass for the Dead. It was not until quite towards

the conclusion that the unexpected occurred. The old father got up from his seat, and, tottering, came forward. His broken voice rose shrilly gaining in strength.

"Blessed are the peace-makers, for they shall be known as the children of God."

It was the little Christmas service of the Peace-making, falling in where it would have fallen, at the end of the Midnight Mass. When the customary brief allocution was reached, the old priest gasped for breath. In a few simple words he told his hearers that he would never keep Christmas with them again; he had grieved to see how dissensions had increased among them; the recent murder had filled all Christian souls with horror. Once more before God called him away to his rest, he desired to hold among them the wonted festival. He had chosen this anniversary of the death of her to whom the institution owed its origin, the blessed peace-maker that had long been called away from amongst their midst. "But the eternal Prince of Peace is here," said the father: in the utter silence his feeble words fell low. "He is here, and He is waiting for His birth in every heart. And His message is the same, my children, yesterday, to-night, and for ever, the message of forgiveness and good-will."

As he ceased speaking, the simple village choir, but little disconcerted, raised the familiar chant of the Heavenly Host, and the whole congregation took it up. As the Christmas Anthem filled the building the two brothers left their places—none has ever distinguished who moved first—and silently crossed the chancel and grasped each other's hands.

The father stood, with arms uplifted, transfigured, upheld.

Out of the congregation, before any other could stir, two old men pushed their way to the front, and, below the chancel-steps, Paul and Peter embraced.

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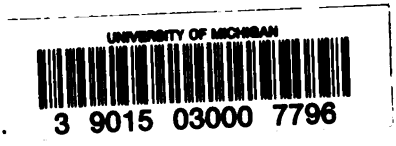
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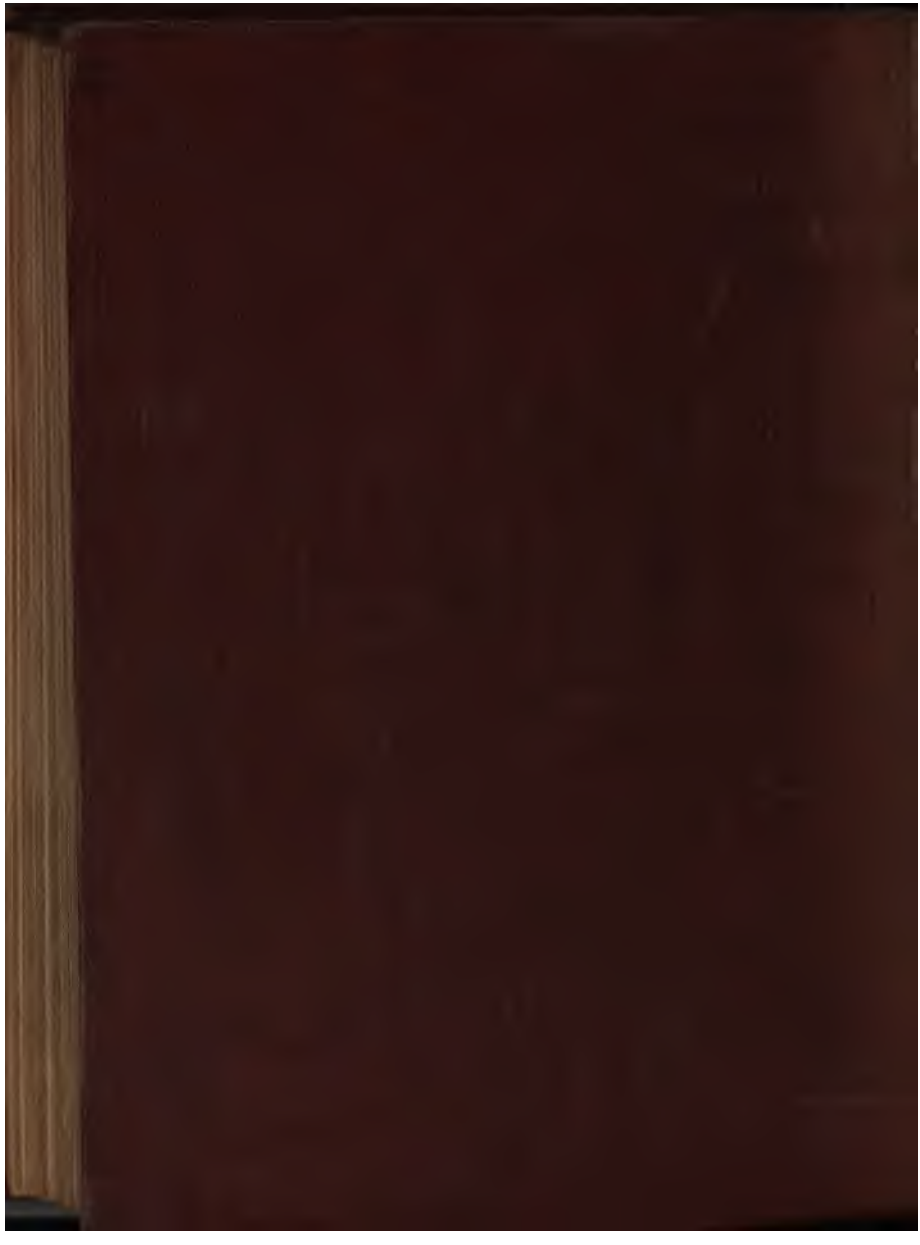
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